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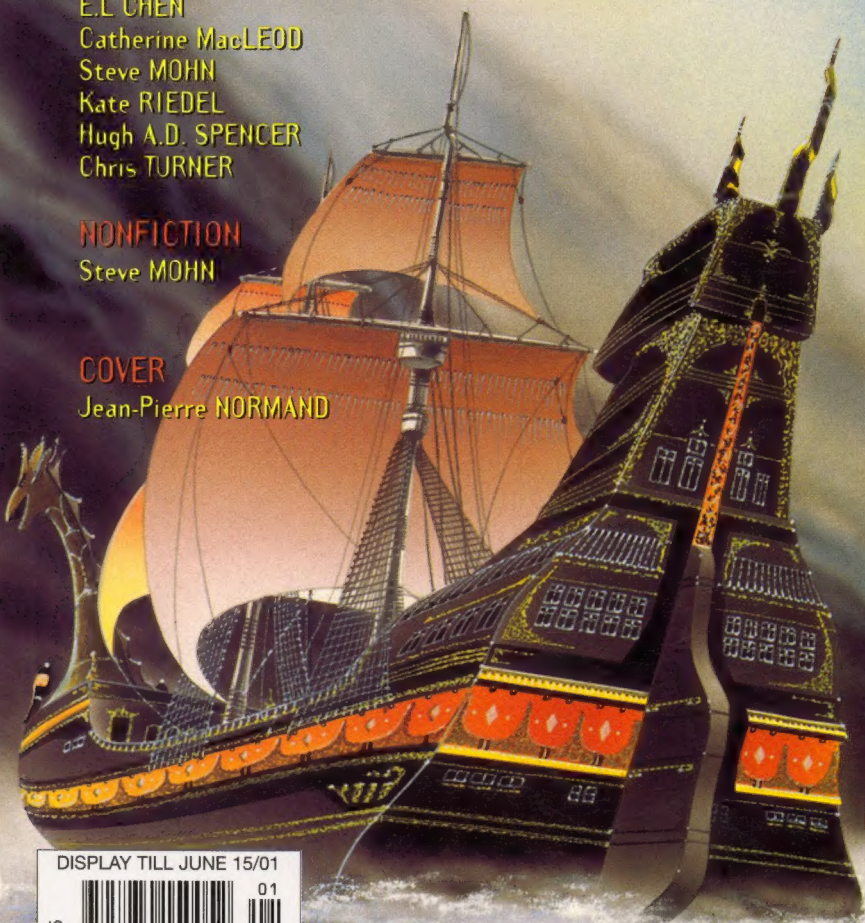
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ConSpec 2001

a symposium on SF in Canada

September 13 - 16, 2001

Cedar Park Inn, Edmonton, Alberta

with our Guests of Honor

Michael Bishop

and

Allen Steele

September 13-14

Writing Workshop led by
Michael Bishop and Allen Steele

September 15-16

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Presented by On Spec Magazine
with assistance from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

On·Spec

Spring 2001

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COVER:

"Discovery"

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On·SPEC

Vol. 13, No. 1, #44

Spring 2001

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On Spec is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of the Copper Pig Writers' Society, a nonprofit society. Annual subscriptions are \$22.00 for individuals and \$30.00 for institutions. (Price includes GST. GST # 123625295.) For US and overseas rates, see p. 13. Send SASE (Canadian postage) for advertising rate card, contributors' guidelines, payment schedule, and complete back issue details.

Send all mail (letters, story/poetry submissions, subscription requests or queries, art samples, etc.) to *On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6. Ph: (780) 413-0215. Fax: (780) 413-1538 (please call first). All fiction/poetry submissions: if you want a reply, you MUST include self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE); or, if submitting from outside Canada, include self-addressed envelope (SAE) and International Reply Coupons to cover return postage. Manuscripts without sufficient postage on SASE will not be returned. We don't read faxed or e-mailed submissions, or previously published work (in print or on the web). Enclose cover letter including name, address, story/poem title, phone number, and word count (6,000 words max. for fiction; 100 lines max. for poetry). If manuscript is disposable, include SASE for reply. We reply by mail only. Nonfiction and artwork are commissioned only. Send samples of artwork (copies) Attn: Art Director. No portion of this magazine may be reproduced without individual author's or artist's consent.

Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Cultural Industries Branch; The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Canada Council for the Arts; the Department of Canadian Heritage; Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development; and Clear Lake Ltd.

On Spec is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers' Association (CMPA) and the Alberta Magazine Publishers' Association, and is distributed in Canada by CMPA and AMPA, and in the United Kingdom by BBR.

Typesetting and layout in PageMaker on a Macintosh PowerPC by Jena Snyder.
Body typeface is Baskerville. Headline typeface is Template Gothic.

Printed in Canada by Bolder Graphics

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On this issue...

Now entering year 13

Into the new

Jean-Pierre Normand's cover painting, "Discovery," reminds me of *The Perfect Storm*, but not in the way you might think. I don't see a doomed ship and crew, or an impossible towering wave. What I see is the incredible blue of the water, the arching dragon on the prow, a ship full of magic sailing into the new.

I hope that's how our new General Editor, DIANE L. WALTON feels as she takes the helm of this fantastic ship. I've enjoyed being the pilot for the past few years, but it's time for me to take a much-needed break. Please join me in welcoming Diane to her new post.

I won't be going far—just back to my old job as Production Editor in charge of typesetting, layout, and prepress with the magazine, the same job I was doing back in 1989 for the first issue of *On Spec*. It's hard to believe it's been 13 years since the members of the writing group known as the Copper Pig Writers' Society got together and decided that yeah, we really *were* crazy enough to sail to the edge of the world and see what was out there!

We're making a change in art direction as well, with BARRY HAMMOND taking over for JANE STARR (who decided that juggling three jobs, teaching Tai Chi, raising a family, *and* doing volunteer work was somehow just a little too much). Barry takes over as of the Fall 2001 issue, which features a knock-your-socks-off cover by GRANT LEIER.

—Jena Snyder, Production Editor

Sleep? Who needs it!

We've just passed *Freedom to Read* week, and I trust that you all went out to your library or book store and got one of those "challenged" books. You know—books like *Who Has Seen the Wind?* and *Harry Potter*. Dangerous stuff, that. Can't have it in our homes. No telling what kind of radical thinking it

might lead to.

And now I'm General Editor of the magazine. Even after 12 years, there is always something new to be learned about *On Spec*. We are continually encouraged by the support from the loyal readers who renew their subscriptions. It proves to us that we are providing good entertainment value for your hard-earned money.

We're competing with so many other distractions for a few precious hours of your time. And so when you tell us that you read *On Spec* on the bus in the morning, or on your coffee break, or in those few precious minutes before you drift off to sleep at night, it makes us try that much harder to keep you turning the pages to the very last yawn. Guy Kay once said (and forgive me, Guy, if I paraphrase) that sleep is his enemy, because he writes stories that must keep people fighting sleep, every night of the week. And we are more than happy to join in that noble fight.

Derryl Murphy's fine tribute to the late GORDON R. DICKSON (please see page 35) brought back my own memory of Gordy, one that goes back more than twenty years, to a NonCon SF convention in Edmonton. He was our "local boy makes good" Guest of Honor. He may well have been the best party animal we ever had at one of those conventions! Staying up late into the night, he sang filk songs with the fans, and played my acoustic guitar, gladly surrendered to him for the weekend. He also collected songs in his travels, and I sang a verse from "Farewell to Nova Scotia" for his tape recorder, shortly before he left for home. It seems he had found a filk song that used the tune, but he never knew what it was supposed to sound like until he came to NonCon. We hope he took back some good memories of his home town.

At a party at our home not long ago, my friends and I stood and drank a toast to Gordy's memory. We used his favourite scotch, Johnny Walker Red. He'll be missed. ✱

ConSpec 2001

Don't forget to sign up for CONSPEC 2001 before the end of May to take advantage of the great Early Bird price!

—Diane L. Walton, General Editor

Upcoming events

ConSpec 2001

THOSE OF YOU WHO WERE THERE IN 1999 WILL remember ConSpec as one of the finest conferences/conventions you've ever had the opportunity to attend. The level of discourse was high, the guests were fascinating and engaging, and *On Spec* editor Peter Watts learned how to pronounce "Proust."

This year we're on again, in Edmonton on September 15 and 16, with special guests MICHAEL BISHOP and ALLEN STEELE. Michael is the author of 19 novels and 6 collections, and he has won two Nebulas: one for his novelette "The Quickening" and one for his novel *No Enemy But Time*. He is, in my mind, one of the finest writers in the field today; *Ancient of Days*, *Unicorn Mountain*, and *Brittle Innings* rank among my all-time favorite books.

Allen is a highly-respected hard SF author whose books include *Orbital Decay*, *King of Infinite Space*, *The Jericho Iteration* and *Oceanspace*. His ninth novel is coming out this year. He has won two Hugos, for his terrific novellas "The Death of Captain Future" and for "...Where Angels Fear to Tread."

In addition to the conference itself, Michael and Allen have generously agreed to team-teach a writing workshop for the two days leading up to ConSpec, September 13-14. Students who are accepted for the workshop will also automatically be registered for ConSpec itself. Special price for the workshop and registration is \$90. There is limited space available for this workshop, and as it promises to be a smart and intense two days, I recommend that anyone interested get registered right away.

For more information, go to our web site:

www.compusmart.ab.ca/clear/conspec.htm

I can also be emailed at **conspec@canada.com**, and am willing to answer any questions you might have.

Early Bird Registration: \$35 until May 1, 2001

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May 2 - September 1: \$45 • After September 1 and at the door: \$55.

— Derryl Murphy



Thank you!

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank BILLIE SCOTT for her generous donation to On Spec, made in memory of her husband, the late and greatly missed KEITH SCOTT.

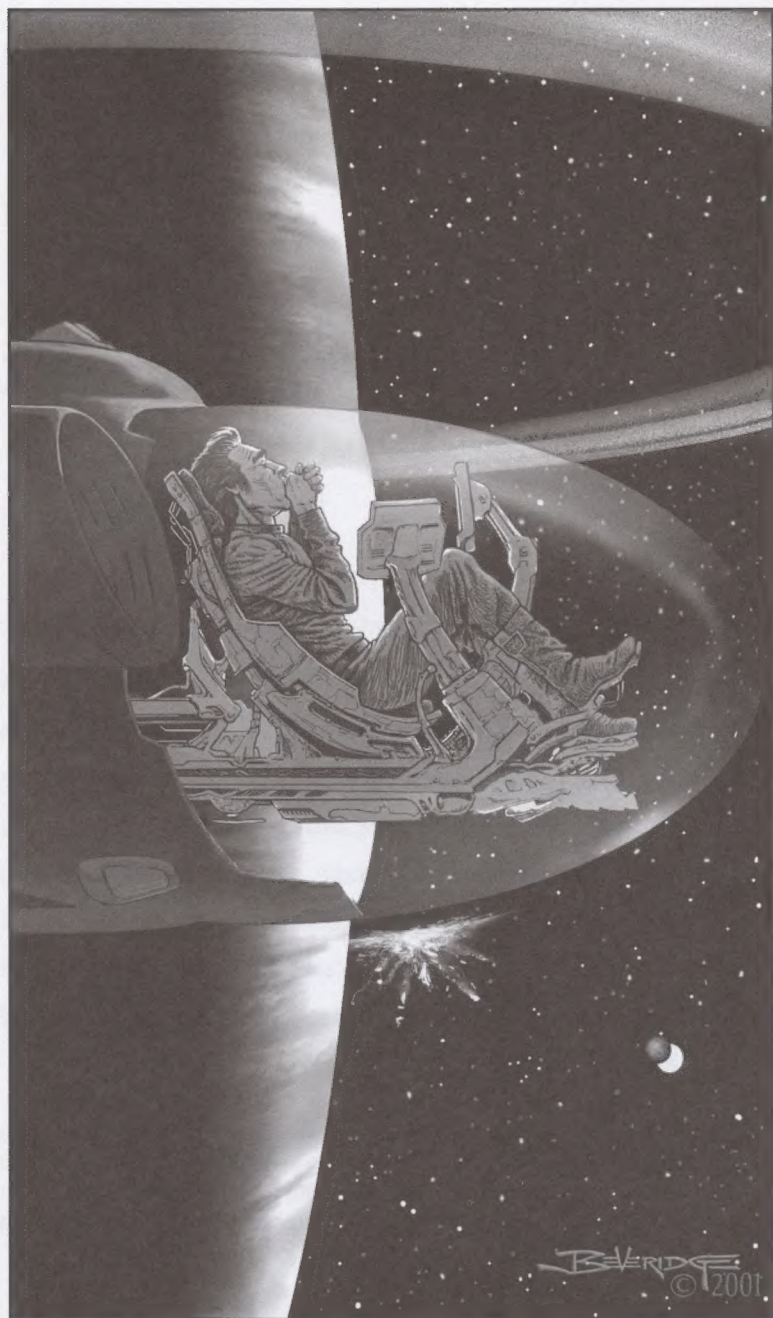
With Billie's donation, we were able to register and secure our own domain name, onspec.ca, and when time becomes available, we'll be redesigning and expanding our current website to offer our readers all sorts of interesting new features.

If you have suggestions or comments, we'd like to hear them—please write or email us:

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About our cover artist

JEAN-PIERRE NORMAND (Cover: "Discovery") is a professional illustrator, specializing in science fiction and fantasy for the past twenty years. Over one hundred book and magazine covers featuring his work have been published in Canada and the United States. He generally works in ink and liquid acrylic applied with brush and airbrush; average size of originals is 9 x 16 inches. His work has been shown at various conventions and other exhibits, winning several awards, notably the Aurora for artistic achievement in Canada in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999. His work was published twice in *Spectrum*, the best in contemporary fantasy art. Jean-Pierre is working on set conceptions for the movie *Pluto Nash* and design machinery for the production *Oceania*. He is finishing 48 color illustrations for a series of three science fiction books for children edited by Julie Czerneda and presented by Gregory Benford, Carolyn Cherry, and David Brin. 🍁



FRONTISPIECE: "The Saturn Ring Blues," page 14

© James Beveridge, 2001

Precision Set

L.E. Modesitt, Jr.

HE CALLS HIMSELF CHARLEY CABLE. THAT IS/IS NOT his name. At the moment he sits in the third row at the Sports Pavilion, watching the gymnasts warm up. Although the Pavilion is full, and tickets are so scarce that there are no scalpers plying the Plaza outside, each seat beside him is vacant. The price he has paid for all three seats would have bought him a suite at the local Ritz-Singleton for a season. He wears a classic blue wool blazer and gray slacks, with a white silk shirt and black leather boots. He is the only man in the section who wears a jacket, and the only one who wears no jewelry.

The glow from the slow-glass panels increases, indirect but bright enough to provide perfect lighting for the competitors and clear illumination of the various gymnastic apparati on the Pavilion floor—the four-centimeter beam that replaced the older four-inch beam a generation earlier; the vaulting horse; the bars; and the floor exercise square.

For a moment, Charley concentrates.

“...say the Basque team has a new technique for kinesthetics...”

“...NordAms are still using enhanced physical patterning...”

He lets his concentration lapse, and the clear words drop into background noise, not soothing, but only vaguely disturbing. The fingers of his right hand slip across his forehead, not quite touching or brushing back the short but otherwise nondescript brown hair streaked with silver. His eyes are a deep hazel.

On the Pavilion floor, the warm-ups continue, each girl-woman moving effortlessly, gracefully, and precisely. The judges fiddle with their laser-measuring/calibration equipment. The audience juggles programs and personal computoculars.

The slightest of sounds alerts him, a pattern he has memorized, if self-programming recognition to precise sonic patterns can accurately be called memorization, and he forces himself to turn his gaze toward the aisle slowly, as if in idle curiosity, although his curiosity, comparatively new as it is, is seldom idle.

She is slender, black-haired, and of an indeterminate age beyond youth and before obvious physical degeneration. She wears a cream-colored cotton blouse, hand tailored, a dark skirt of real wool, and a turquoise silk scarf. Charley watches her for a time, sensing rather than actually seeing the blackness behind the china-blue eyes. Her low-cut, light black leather, laced shoes touch each step with unvarying precision, as if each foot understands independently where it should go.

Charley nods. Each foot is programmed to react kinesthetically to the situation. He raises a hand as she looks in his direction. Her eyes meet his, and he points to the seat beside him.

With a sad smile, she shakes her head. Charley points again.

This time, she walks in front of a pseudo-family—a boy, a girl, and two parents wearing unisex clothes and hair—and eases into the seat on his left. She does not look at the chair, yet settles into it perfectly. “Are you sure?”

Charley is sure. He bought the tickets for privacy and for her. This is the fifth competition he has attended. “I’m Charley Cable.”

“You could have sold these seats.”

“I wasn’t interested in selling them.”

Charley concentrates on the narrow beam, where a delicate redhead practices a double flip with a full twist, followed by a single with a half-twist to a handstand. “Is that Maureen Dinisha?” he asks, knowing full well that the redhead is Dinisha, having seen her in the four previous sessions.

“The redhead? Yes. She is very precise.” The woman’s voice is soft, yet as clearly defined as her steps, posture, and grooming.

“Aren’t they all?”

“Of course. That’s why...”

She does not finish the sentence, but he knows what she means. Both look toward the precision measuring equipment used by the judges.

“Do you really want to torture yourself more?” he asks gently.

Her head snaps toward him. Hazel eyes meet blue eyes.

“How would you know?”

"Why else would you be here? Obviously, someone let you in without a ticket, and that means..."

"You are too perceptive."

"No," Charley says truthfully, for lying remains difficult with his literal background. He knows her patterns through observation, not perception. He stands up. "Shall we go?"

She sighs. "I suppose you're right."

"That remains to be seen." He offers a hand that she does not need.

She takes it, but puts no weight upon him as she rises, graceful as always. They ease past the pseudo-family, and both parents glare, either at their obviously conservative and wealthy attire or their cavalier departure even before the competition begins.

"What do you do?" she asks, halfway up the aisle to the exit landing.

"I'm a consultant. I receive a considerable stipend...for past services. I also design advanced DataNets, communications equipment."

They pause at the top of the aisle as the slow-glass panels above the audience dim in preparation for the competition proper.

"You haven't asked what I do," she says. "Doesn't it matter?"

"I wouldn't define you just by what you do." Charley provides an easy smile, although it is a mannerism that he has had to learn. "What do you do?"

"I also receive a stipend for...past services. I teach athletic...history...at the University-part-time."

As they exit the Plaza, Charley's eyes scan the scattered crowd, studying those outside until he sees three girls, all pre-pubescent, all bearing tablets and styli, all clearly hoping for a sight of Sirelli or Dinisha or perhaps even Yurkira. They wait, despite the lateness of the hour, and he stops in front of them, and smiles.

"I've been called away, ladies. Would you like my tickets? They're third row center off the floor exercise." He extends the plastic coated oblongs, with the holograms that are difficult, if not impossible, to counterfeit.

"Thanks!" The tallest girl, smooth-skinned as all youth are, but still awkward, takes the tickets.

Charley nods, watching as they scramble toward the doorway, clutching the tickets as though they were made of gold when gold was itself valuable.

"That was cruel," the woman says.

"In a way." Her observation of the effect of his gift pleases him, but not totally, for he does not engage in wanton cruelty.

"Where are we going?"

"Can you stand a long drive? Several hours?"

"If I must." She smiles. "Why should I trust you?"

"I'm eminently trustworthy. I have too much to lose by not being trustworthy. Consultants, you know, only survive through their clients' trust."

"I'm sure. But does that translate into personal relations?"

"I hope so." His vehicle is deep-coated gun-metal gray, and bears the

antenna that indicate its ties to the national automated road system. He opens the door for her.

"I didn't know anyone still did that."

"My programming is doubtless dated."

They only use the highway for a time before he turns off and takes a side road, which winds through hillier and increasingly wooded land, generally obscure in details in the darkness. Beside him, the woman rests, dozes perhaps.

Still later, as the sky is graying into dawn, he turns up a dirt road. He stops beside a small house—gray, late twentieth century modern with excessive glass—overlooking a lake. After opening her door, he pulls a small but heavy pack from the car.

"If this is yours, I'd appreciate the chance to..."

Charley purses his lips, another learned mannerism, and opens the unlocked front door. "It's the first door on the left."

He uses the upstairs facilities and then returns and waits by the vehicle.

She returns before long. "This is yours? It's lovely."

"It is mine. Consultants do have a choice of locales in this electronic age." He offers his arm. She ignores the offer by touching his elbow.

"I'd like you to look at the lake from the wall down there." He points to the path, which circles through the lawn and past a garden filled with bright yellow marigolds and crimson petunias.

They walk downhill, their steps precise for very different reasons.

Old as the stones are, the wall has been maintained. Charley sits on a precisely reset stone wall and places the small pack by his feet. He looks down at the lake. "I told you my name was Charley Cable. I'm a man who doesn't exist."

"You look real enough to me." She remains standing.

"Your name is Cylvira. You were the first cyber-kinesthetic gymnast. You won the Gold medal in the 2012 Olympics, and every event in the Worlds' for the two years before and after the Olympics."

"Cylvira died a long time ago."

"I'm a man who doesn't exist."

"Neither one of us makes much sense." Her tone is bitter. "I should not have come."

"You retired when the new techniques became widespread."

"Cylvira was obsolete even when she won the Olympics."

"Obsolete refers to machines."

"You saw Dinisha. You saw the judges with their lasers that measure deviations from the horizontal and vertical by micromillimeters. Is that human?"

Charley gestures toward the lake, so still in the dawn that the trees on the far shore appear to grow in two directions. "The water reflects the trees perfectly, but it is still water."

"Don't you ever say anything directly?"

"It's hard for someone who doesn't exist."

"What do you want?"

"Would you sit down?"

She sits, and they watch the lake, as slowly, the faintest of breezes ripples the water, and the upside-down picture of the trees and cloud-specked sky shivers, wavers, and vanishes. Only a single set of trees remains above the cold blue water.

"It is a pretty place." Cylvira's eyes shift toward Charley.

"Do you know what a data lattice looks like?"

Cylvira frowns.

"Or an enhanced if-then decision tree?" Charley smiles. "They're black and white, incredibly detailed black and white pieces that form pyramids or chains. For all the graphic arts presentations that show artificial intelligence in colors, it's not that way."

He bends down and opens his pack. From it, he removes two headsets and a black box with two input leads. He plugs each headset into the box and hands one to her.

"No!" Cylvira stands, handing the headset back to him with a harshly precise motion.

"These aren't implantation sets. They're just impression sets. Look at the leads. You should know the difference." Charley waits.

"Why?"

"I want to give you two impressions."

"This isn't big enough for an impression set."

"Technology does advance." His voice is dry. "Besides, Cylvira is dead."

She laughs, raggedly, but it is a laugh. This time she takes the headset.

Charley puts on his set, then touches a stud on the black box.

He looks at the lake, concentrating on its blueness, and upon the dark green of the tall pines, their brown trunks, and the puffy white clouds overhead, upon the scent of damp-air pine, and hard texture of the stone under his hand, the feel of the silk against his skin. He touches her hand and lets her sense the wonder of the warmth of her skin and fingers against his. Then he looks back at the lake for a long time, marveling at its colors and how it changes from moment to moment.

Then he touches the second stud on the box, calling up past memories—cold lines of black and white bytes, chains of black and white, black and white, black and white...white and black, black and black. No scents, no smells, no colors—the chains go on endlessly, looping, flashing, but always black and white, white and black.

He touches the stud, and removes the headset.

Silently, Cylvira removes hers. "You're..."

He nods. "The man who no longer exists. The AI they plugged into a brain-drained killer named...his name doesn't matter. I'm Charley Cable, or I'm not."

She shivers. "Do all AIs feel so...so...cold?"

"No. Only the ones who have to become human. How can you know what color is until you see it?"

She takes his hand. "Thank you." The darkness behind the china-blue eyes is lighter, although it will never totally lift.

"Wait a moment." He sets the black box on the ground beside the stone wall. With a quick motion his booted heel crunches through the plastic and circuitry. Then he replaces the pieces in the pack and seals it, setting it carefully on the wall.

His name is/is not Charley Cable. Her name is/is not Cylvira. There are no cyber-kinesthetic gymnasts, and no former killers/ethically enhanced computers.

A couple walks along the lakeshore, their arms entwined. Neither exists. ♣

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Please indicate whether you want your subscription to start with the current issue or the next issue (i.e. Spring 2001 or Summer 2001).

The Saturn Ring Blues

James Van Pelt

OLD JELLY ROLL MORTON'S SOULFUL VOICE FILLS THE buglighter's cabin. Nothing more mournful and perfect than a good, solid dose of the blues while you're waiting at the edge of the ring for the start of the race. That and the cloud-striped surface of Saturn turning below, the dusky-edged ridge of the rings above, catching a little of the reflected light, and between them both the sharp-eyed light of the stars. Lots of sad-stringed guitar and bent-note blues harp, and his whiskey voice down deep. It's a poolhall voice.

I met Elinor in a poolhall. She had an attractive way of blowing chalk dust off her knuckles that caught my eye. We racked up games till the bar closed. Only thing I can beat her at. I see the angles clear. "You got those angle eyes," she said.

It's true. I even like my hull transparent. Most of the equipment's behind, all that stuff that shapes the forces around the buglighter, keeping me safe from danger, and, when the need arises, pushing me where I want to go. So with the hull clear, I'm sitting alone and pretty in the stars. That's the

way I feel, just like those blues songs tell me: "Lordy, I'm all by myself since my baby done left me."

Lots of buglighters can't do it—perch in the clear like I do—too much space around them. It's hard on the heart. Elinor said to me, "Virgil, you're too much of a sit down and look around kind of guy." She would know, I guess.

Of course I wasn't paying attention at the time; we were playing pool and I said, "Shh. I'm concentrating."

The starter's voice interrupts the music: "Flyers, welcome to the 17th annual Greater Circumference of Saturn Ring Runners Challenge, 2,500-kilo class. Five minutes to race time."

A hundred meters around, dust motes spark off the bubble that contains me. Zap, zap...there go a couple more. That's where we get the name *buglighter*, little bits of ice and rock, zappin' like firecrackers in the forces surrounding us. In five minutes the race will start, and I'll adjust the bubble. Instead of flicking that ring sand away, it'll suck it in, transform it in an instant, and shape the pulse into comforting thrust, rolling me around the inside of the ring on fission fire in my perfect sphere of protecting energy, sort of like a transparent cue ball bounding off the bumpers of the ring. From the start, all the way around again, about 578,000 kilometers, or roughly fifteen times the circumference of the Earth.

Over my shoulder, Elinor's buglighter is all aglow. She's a hot one, she is. She likes to start these races fast, so she's storing energy in the field. She's always got a plan. Plan ahead, that's her. She didn't see me in her future, I guess. Cut me loose clean. She likes to fly light.

"Gotcha on my backside, Elinor G," I say on a private channel, figuring that it won't hurt to assay some warmth in her direction.

"Cut the chatter, Delta Mud," she says. That's my ship, not me. Feel that way most the time though, just as low down as can be. So I turn up the music. Little bit of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, "Blues from the Lowlands." I got 'em too. Got 'em bad. Don't know why you're sayin' no to me, Elinor G.

Nothing to do then except study the course ahead, sending out some high-imaging radar. It shows me what to miss—klunking into a chunk of ring matter bigger than a football or so at 50,000 kph would put a dent in my day, and, of course, it'll send that rock flying like a cannonball in the opposite direction—but, it doesn't show me where to go: the rich sand and pebbles I can eat up and convert to thrust. That's the art and joy of ring running: dodging the big ones; following the fuel, shooting fast around the ring without spinning out.

My first two chords are clear, but after that, I'll be checking as I go: thousands of kph, glimpsing ahead for widow-makers on the high-wire edge of the ring. It's only a kilometer wide, generally, at least only a kilometer of usable rock.

Ring racing is in the chords' progression and rhythm—like the blues—cutting across the arc of the orbit's circle. The way I fly, the shorter the

chords, the faster the ship. Look and blast, look and blast. Can't look while you're blasting (too much interference); can't blast without looking (otherwise you'd be sure to fetch up against some pocky chunk of rock, big as a barn, and your race would be over forever). It's a funny looking race, if you diagram it. Put two circles on a piece of paper, one inside the other, and the outside one not too much bigger than the inner. That inside circle is Saturn. The outside one is the inner edge of the ring. Now take a ruler and draw a straight line that connects two points of the outer circle without crossing the inner circle. That's one chord. If you keep drawing chords, you end up with a polygon that goes around the planet. That's the race.

My angle of entry into the rings is shallow, and most of the bigger rocks are deeper in, so I minimize risk while maximizing speed. Elinor, though, she takes these long chords, building up speed on each one; each one dives her deeper into the ring. It's scary genius at work to watch her fly.

So I keep the chords short to play those high-speed blues. I take out my C-harp and blow a few chords of my own—still nothing better than a Marine Band harmonica. Well engineered instrument, the harmonica: light, compact, fits in the hand, feels cool on the lips. Good acoustics in a bug-lighter too. Echoes back in nice and tight, like singing in a shower. I try out a new line for my “Elinor Blues”: “Elinor, Elinor, you don't be coming round anymore.” A common blue's pattern is statement, repeat and a variation. Got the statement and repeat down pat, but don't know a variation yet. I try one out. Five minutes is a long time for a race to start.

Elinor, Elinor, you don't be coming round anymore.

Elinor, Elinor, you don't be coming round anymore.

Been five long years, baby. Waitin's been such a chore.

Can't think of her as “baby.” She's all hard muscle and physics-brain bright. Give her enough numbers and just enough fuel, and she could—with one solid blow—dead-stick the rest of the way a course from the moon Rhe to Titan and not miss her orbit slot by a couple of meters. But every guy singing the blues calls his baby “baby.”

The signal starts the race. Elinor and a couple others blast on the dot, brightness enveloping their buglighters, glowing like acetylene teardrops. My ship gathers in sand, sucks in a larger pebble or two; most of the mass converted into energy. Screen shows I've got a clear shot deeper into the ring. Greater chance of crashing into something, but the usable detritus is thicker. Let it go all at once. The good solid thump of the nuclear explosion behind me pushes me into my seat. Thank God for inertia dampers, otherwise I'd be a thin jelly on the back wall of the cabin.

Right off, rocks start clattering against the bubble, lost in bright sparks. I've gained speed, moved up in the orbit, further into the dust.

We run the race on the inner edge of the “B” ring, the bright one you can even see from Earth with a reasonable telescope. The “C” ring below is much thinner. Hard to guarantee you'll find rock to blast with when you

need it. The "A" ring is farther out; it's got that cool gap in it where the moon, Pan, orbits.

In my monitor, I see Elinor's ship. She's taken a long chord as her first jump, crossing all that mostly empty space. It's a shorter distance to go around, as I mentioned, but a riskier tactic.

"You like a brief life, Elinor?" I say.

"Brief and bright," she says.

I do some quick calculations and whistle in appreciation. She'll dive into the ring for a couple of hundred kilometers before she'll have the energy for her next blast. Her radar can't penetrate that deep. Too much intervening sand.

"Going for the record?"

"Already got it," she says.

And she does; won last year, and I pulled up a lame second.

Time for the next blast. Race like this is an art. Sort of a mix between orbital mechanics, demolition derby and pool; the whole thing done with your heart gripped firmly between your teeth so you don't lose it.

"Going slow there, Delta Mud," she says, but I can't answer before I slam through the burn. Bubbles go white and glorious as they store up the energy, then release it all at once. Can't hear it, naturally, though my music gets fuzzy during; way too much radiant activity to avoid that, and the inertia dampers don't completely mask the thrust of it. My seat presses hard into my back. I feel every wrinkle in my shirt.

Monitors are clear. Nothing in my way, so I set up for the next chord.

"Eaten any cold dinners lately?" I say.

"No," she says. "Have you?"

I let that question hang out there awhile. It's a friendly response, if I hear it right, and probably because she's got an early lead. Used to be I'd go visit her for dinner pretty regular, and we never did get right to eating it. One thing led to another, you know, and the dinner would cool off.

So an answer takes a bit of thinking. Is she opening the door here? Are all those cold, cold nights looking out at lonely stars about to come to an end?

I wish I could see her. You know, to watch her face. She's got this way of letting the corners of her mouth twitch up when she's making a joke. It's real subtle. Lots of folk don't notice. And she shakes her head sometimes, like she's getting hair out of her eyes, though her hair is spacer-short.

How's she looking now? What I need is a deep-imaging radar of the heart. Something to peer in there to check on those pocky rocks drifting unseen.

She's about to end a chord, so I check her progress.

Ring racing is the hardest kind there is. *Straight* races...well, they're simple. Thrust behind mass, and don't miss. Best technology wins. Pilot might as well stay home (singing the blues). But here—whew! Faster you go, the more dangerous it is. More chances for mistakes. Less time for decisions. All the time risking spinout, missing the ring, flying off with better than

escape velocity and no mass anywhere to grab.

She's in the ring now. Gathering energy. Blasting. Her trajectory changes, and she's shooting back out the ring to the relatively clear space beneath.

I've got some time. She'll be checking the path ahead, figuring her next burn.

I make sure the transmitter is off, blow the harmonica some more—make the harp sing:

Elinor, Elinor, saw you walking in the stars.

Elinor, Elinor, saw you walking in the stars.

Venus at your toetips; your fingers touching Mars.

She said, "I think I can cut four chords off last year."

I shake my head. "You'll be sucking Saturn's atmosphere. Not worth the speed you lose."

She chuckles. "For you, maybe. Have you checked the competition?"

I hadn't bothered. She's the only other ship I care about, but I tap the display and the others pop onto the grid, way behind.

"Looks like it's just you and me."

"And the record," she adds. "How's it feel to be the second-best flyer in the rings?" She's laughing. Pure speed does that to her.

"When you're beat by the best," I say, "who cares about the rest?"

"That's sweet, Virgil."

I'm into my next burn. Speed's up, so the bubble fairly crackles, sending dust and tiny rocks in all directions and storing energy. I let it go, and the chair kicks into my back, snapping my head into the support. Inertia dampers are good, but most ships let their thrust out more gradual because they carry mass to convert to energy with them. Buglighters don't carry anything but some maneuvering fuel. All the rest is gathered in, then wham, released in a hurry.

A few chords later, speed's way up, and my work's harder. Soon as the interference clears, I check the radar for rocks, plug in the new numbers, and let the computer go to work with trajectories and mid-course corrections. While it crunches numbers, I've got nothing to do but think.

Blues are perfect for space, and I'll bet if B.B. King or Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters were alive today, they'd be buglighters. All that other music, well, it has beginnings and ends, but not the blues. You can take any song and run it for hours with variations, letting it build or slide down low. It's back porch music, smoky poolhall music, buglighter music. You can tell when you're in a spacer bar by the music. It's all guitars and bass and C-harp bent all over those blues notes. Every tune's despairing, but kind of funny too, sort of like cruising in the rings. Part of it's deadly serious, and then you have to laugh. Blues and buglighting and my love for Elinor are just too ironic to keep a straight face.

See, when you're singing the blues, you start off all sad and lonely, but after a while, you're into the music. You forget why you started the song,

and you're just doing the song. And buglighting, you forget why you started or where you're going, and you're just flying the chords. There's music in them. Music in the light and the rhythm. Music in the rainbow of colors when the distant sun catches the rings just right. Music in the shadows and darkness behind Saturn. It's the blues, man; everyone knows it's the blues.

We go like this for a while. I blast three times for every two of Elinor's. It's kind of sobering watching her eat up the distance. She's got so much speed, and it's building. I'm going about as fast as I feel I can go. My burns now just get me into the new chord; they don't add much velocity.

But that's the way it's always been. Old Elinor is always a jump or two ahead of me.

"Doesn't look like you're going to give me a race this year, Virgil."

"It's a long way around," I say.

"I'll have a drink set up for you when you get in," she says.

I'm a ways from my next turn, so I switch to her monitors so I can see what she sees. It's scary. Her angle of attack is high. She can only see a third of the distance into the ring that she penetrates.

"Assuming you make it," I say.

Her screen is graying out as she enters the ring. A couple of big rocks glow off her path; they're no danger, but I've never seen stuff that big moving by so fast. She's busy, so I don't say anything, and switch back to my own monitor. She fades out as she gets deeper. I won't see her till she exits, and I check my own course again. Looks like clear sailing to me.

"Uh-oh," she says.

I shouldn't be able to hear her yet. I check the screen. She's there, going the wrong direction, outside of the ring. A spinout.

"You all right?" I ask. Silly question, really. If she wasn't, I wouldn't have heard anything at all. She wouldn't be on the monitor.

"Shoot," she says.

I'm running her numbers through the computer. She's got way too much speed, and she's moving away from the ring. My calculations show she can't push herself back to it either.

"What happened?"

"Hit something," she says.

"How's your system?" I check the emergency bands. She's already sent a "come-hither" to the outer stations. I send one too.

"Smells bad in here," she says, and she chuckles. "I think I burnt some stuff out. Nothing vital. Heck of a shot. Must have been a good-sized chunk."

"Great race while it lasted," I say.

"Yeah," she sounds preoccupied. I roll through my next burn. Our courses are fairly close now, but I'm inside the ring, trailing her, and she's outside the ring, rising fast, way faster than me.

"Have you run the intercepts?" she says.

I hadn't, so I plug in the numbers. They don't look good, and I do them again.

I whistle.

"Yeah," she says. "I don't think anyone can come get me in time."

"Your bubble still sound?" I say. My fingers are dancing over the computer keys, inputting data, asking for alternative scenarios. What happens if she uses her maneuvering fuel to slow down? What happens if she tries to push herself back into the ring? None of them look good.

"Yeah." She sounds sad. I'm not sure if it's because her chances are dim or because she's out of the race.

I switch out of our private channel. Titan station is chattering away to miners on Pan to see if they can raise a ship in time, but they aren't geared for quick takeoffs, and the moon is in the worst place right now for them to mount a rescue. They can get to her, but it would be hours too late. If she'd been going a reasonable speed, no problem, but she's got way too much velocity. Without a steady supply of fissionable mass, her buglighter will shut down and she'll freeze solid. Buglighters aren't built for empty space. They're ring-runners.

The other racers are talking too. Somebody says he'll chase her, which is plain stupid because he'd never catch her, and even if he did, what good would it do? He couldn't bring her on board. He couldn't bring mass out to her.

"I'm going to try braking," she says. "It'll slow me up, and maybe someone on the outer rings can catch me."

"No, don't," I say. "Not yet. Save the fuel."

My imaging radar shows me the ring ahead, mostly fuzz since it's pebbles and sand with a few bright spots that represent bigger rocks. I'm looking for the right-sized rock on the edge of the ring. Idea's forming. Nothing looks good, though, so I kick through the next burn and start scanning as soon as I'm clear.

"What do you have in mind?" she says.

"Shh. I'm concentrating." I'm thinking about angles, mass, velocity and risk, so I'm not paying much attention to conversation.

Rock can't be too big. It'd kill my ship, and I couldn't give it the speed it'd need to catch her. Can't be too small either. The impact would turn it to dust, and it wouldn't give her enough energy if any of it did reach her buglighter. And the whole idea is a little wacky anyway. The odds of making the shot are incredible. Quite a bit worse than running two bumpers to sink the eight-ball in the corner pocket.

On the monitor, a likely candidate pops up. It's on Elinor's edge of the ring. Not too deep. Chances are I can line up on it, not be deflected on the way in, and it won't be deflected on the way out. Hitting right, though, that's the problem. If I miss by even a fraction of an inch, the rock could spew away at a useless angle; Elinor will be in the same fix, and my buglighter will be too busted up for a second shot.

Once the problem's in the computer, it controls my maneuvering jets. I'm running the radar on tight scan now, checking the rock, trying to get

more info on it, and the numbers are coming back good.

"What are you doing?" Elinor asks. I know she can see my buglighter on her monitors. She can do the same trick I did earlier and have her monitors display what I'm seeing.

I don't say anything. Not much I can do at this point anyway, but I'm running a second set of calculations, just as an exercise really, since I'm committed to the collision at this point. Thought it would be interesting to do the math though, to see how much energy my bubble will have to take. The figures come back. They're somewhat above what the specs say the ship will handle. Specs are conservative, I hope.

"Veer off," she says. "Virgil, this won't work."

I check my straps and buckles. Inertia damper is going to get a workout here. "Set your bubble up and get your maneuvering jets ready," I say. "Don't know how close I can get this to you. You might have to chase it." I rotate the buglighter so I'll take the force from behind.

Ship's counting down for me: 10 seconds to impact...9...8... I turn up the music, a little George Thorogood tune, "Bad to the Bone."

5...4...3

Sunlight's glistening off the inner edge of the ring flashing past. Gets a man thinking.

When I wake up, it's silent and dark. My neck hurts. Left elbow is locked up. I touch it gingerly. Shirt's torn there, and it's damp. Don't know what might have hit it. But I've got breathing air, and it's not cold. Pebbles are zapping at the bubble boundary, so more's good than bad here. I'll have to thank the designers of the buglighter for the slop built into their tolerance specs.

Computer doesn't answer to voice controls, but when I flip the auxiliaries on, the monitors glow again and start spewing out a list of damages. Radar won't come up, though, and neither will the radio. Some whiffs of fried circuitry float in the air, so I shut down the main routines and go to the backups.

After a few minutes, the radio crackles and I hear Elinor. "Virgil," she says. "Can you hear me, Virgil?" She sounds like she's crying. Radar's still blank. Can't tell if I helped her or not.

"I'm here," I say.

Nothing over the radio for a bit. I'm scrambling to get the radar online. Can't tell how fast I'm going or if anything nasty is in front of me.

"You're a hell of a pool player," she says finally, and I don't hear any crying in her voice now. "I didn't have to use but about half my fuel to intercept the rock."

"Luck," I say.

She snorts. "It was coming pretty darn fast too. But I got enough of it to make a good burn. I'll be back in the ring in plenty of time."

"You're the master in the ring," I say. Radar starts working, and I do a quick scan. Lost lots of velocity. No ship-killers on the screen, though. A

mini-burn keeps me in the mass field. Don't need a spinout of my own to cause problems.

"Looks like we're both out of the race."

"Could be worse, Elinor." I laugh. My elbow aches, and I unbuckle myself so I can get to the first-aid station.

"I owe you big time," she says.

"You'd have done it for me." The first-aid diagnostic gives me a once-over, suggests a pain medication and alerts the Inner A Station that I'm injured.

"Might have tried," she says. "Couldn't have done it."

"Well, I was motivated."

I ease myself back into the chair, swallow the pain meds and set a nice, slow, easy course back to the station, letting the computer do all the work.

"I've been thinking about that," she says. There's a long pause here. "Maybe we should get together and talk about it some. You know, you could drop over for dinner or something."

I smile. It's been a long time coming. Nights have stretched, and I've played a lot of harmonica in the meantime. Around my ship, little blue glitters of rock and ice catch the reflected light off Saturn. I should be home in a few hours. It'll take her considerably longer.

"I'll think about it," I say, and switch my radio off.

Nothing's more quiet than the silence in a buglighter when your heart is in a turmoil and you're not sure if the one you want wants you. I've charted that course before.

The harmonica fits easily into my hand. A tap or two against my leg clears it out, and I try a few notes. They sound good. They always do.

I know how I'll answer. She probably knows it too. But in the meantime, let *her* sing a little of those Saturn Ring Blues. 🍁

In upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by CORY DOCTOROW, JAMES VAN PELT, DAVID LIVINGSTONE CLINK, ELIZABETH MATSON, VIVIAN ZENARI, JANINE CROSS, ALLAN WEISS, ROBERT H. BEER, CATHERINE MACLEOD, E.L. CHEN, STEVE MOHN, MATTHEW JOHNSON, GARY ARCHAMBAULT, HOLLY PHILLIPS, DOUGLAS SMITH, ALLAN WEISS, NATALKA ROSHAK, KAREN TRAVISS, DAVE KIRTLEY, IAN CREASEY, ANNIE ROBERTS, LENA DETAR, and many more!

On film & SF...

Rosemary's Babies

by Steve Mohn

BACK AROUND HALLOWEEN 2000, WITH *BOOK OF Shadows: Blair Witch 2* due to open, *The Exorcist* was re-released after 28 years. It appeared with most of the original's missing scenes reinserted, a digitized soundtrack and some CGI effects slapped on like decals. At the same time, *Lost Souls*, brought to some state of completion in 1998 by Janusz Kaminski, cinematographer on *Schindler's List*, opened to general critical abuse.

Lost Souls does not build traditionally, but hits the ground running. Maya (Winona Ryder), a deacon (Elias Koteas), and a priest (John Hurt, who waits out much of the film in a coma) know what is going to happen and rapidly fill in the audience. A mass-killer resists exorcism but leaves a coded notebook that Maya, smoking like a fiend, cracks, leading her to popular author Peter Kelson (Ben Chaplin), whose book about deranged murderers, *Vicious Intent*, has put him on the interview circuit. Clues tell Maya that Peter will become the Antichrist on his birthday, a switch from Satan's chronic need to impregnate a woman. To stop this, Kelson must die before his thirty-third.

It's a simple race against time and the film does not lose its way or digress. But there is a problem with that deranged killer, who runs through the film like a backbone. We know he's confined to an institution, that he is a thing

of Satan (and a sort of unreliable workman: he identifies Kelson to Maya, and that cannot be part of the Dark One's plan). In an early scene he appears to Maya, and seems to be her hallucination. But when he appears to her next, he is physically present, though we know nothing about an escape. Then his bone-crunching and viscid discorporation is cut short, as if the editors simply ran out of shots. It's a glitch...but think of the framing device in *Saving Private Ryan*, where the elderly Ryan remembers the whole movie for us...except he wasn't there for most of it.

Lost Souls is slicker than *Exorcist* and has, except for that one glitch, better production values. It has some of the most beautiful low-light camerawork I've seen in years; its exorcism and hallucination scenes are visually and sonically terrific, while *Exorcist* looks grainy and plain, the color starting to fur. This last is ironic, since *Lost Souls* strives to desaturate its color palette and force the film grain to become a surface texture. It's extreme filmmaking. But, finally, it is not as rewarding as *Exorcist*. The surface gloss on *Lost Souls* is a painterly description of nightmare, its nearness to eyes and speaking lips, to handwritten pages, its observations of light and water so nicely done, so obviously meant to be seen and admired. But it turns a little cold.

The Exorcist is warmer, like an old chair, and it works on you, pulling you down into the seams between the cushions where the crumbs and hairs and lost coins hide. And *Exorcist* had to invent the rules. Even with a bestseller to guide the way, it had to prep viewers, bring them in slowly, exhaust the medical and psychiatric possibilities (originally, one missing scene was Regan's first medical exam) and only then seek out a priest. This works because it will always work. A problem with modern movies, especially those that try to scare us, is that makers assume an audience is so urbane, so jaded, that if you waste their time laying the foundation or developing characters, someone in the dark will go: "Bor-ring!"—and there goes your good word-of-mouth.

Not that *The Exorcist* is as good as it was, though it is still powerful, even moving. But the new/old scenes do not always help the picture; they sometimes throw off the original pace. I accept the *Casablanca* ending for the same reason that I like how *Lost Souls* ends when it's over: the audience doesn't need to be weaned. But *Exorcist* is different, and the longer *dénouement* feels fine. It was also a good idea to leave out Regan and her mother touring Washington, DC. Early scenes with Linda Blair and Ellen Burstyn show the real rapport between these actors and, as the film progresses, Burstyn's Chris MacNeil painfully misses her daughter. But what works on the page may not work on the screen for reasons that don't become clear until you are alone with your movie, pounding on the editing table and cursing this miserable world because the scene will not *work* in that sequence, or with the scenes that bracket it. In the re-release, a conversation on the stairs between Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) and Father Karras (Jason Miller) is a fine, deeply felt scene, but shorts the energy between the first lengthy exorcism, then Karras finding Merrin dead, calling the demon into himself

and leaping to his own death. Originally, the exhausted priests pause in silence, then Merrin enters the upstairs bathroom to take his nitroglycerin pills. Karras goes downstairs to speak briefly with Chris. That extra time on the stairs now cheats the film of momentum, making Karras' last scene feel jumpstarted rather than continued. As to the famous "Spider walk," so chilling in the novel, so missed by fans of the original: it just doesn't look that hot.

BOTH FILMS CARRY SIMILAR MOTIFS BUT HANDLE THEM DIFFERENTLY. THE pathetic fallacy shows up in *The Exorcist* in the form of wind (out in the desert, later at Regan's window, then blowing out her mother's candle in the attic), but in *Lost Souls* it arrives in the form of upwelling or overflowing water, usually filthy, and visually more powerful. Interesting too, for a pair of movies separated by a quarter-century, is their use of the psychiatric facility (read: madhouse) as a stage for pivotal scenes. *Lost Souls* opens in such a facility and returns to it, and turns repeatedly to one of its occupants. In *The Exorcist*, Father Karras' elderly mother ends up in a ward of indigent women variously afflicted with senile dementia. (*Book of Shadows* releases its main character from an institution, which might have been that film's first mistake.) This equation of the mentally unbalanced with demons and the supernatural is a hoary cliché. It is at its best in *Lost Souls*, where at least there is a doctor (black and a woman) who feels that the exorcism of madmen is an option past its pull-date. (It doesn't work either.)

Another idea held in common is that hallucinations are a default means by which the devil or his minions reach people. *The Exorcist* uses them sparingly, while *Lost Souls* invests most of its energy in them. *Book of Shadows* more or less depends on hallucinations before ultimately becoming one—the director's.

You feel right away that the separate shots in *The Exorcist* last longer than shots in modern movies like *Lost Souls*. Naturally, there are fewer cuts. Movies made this way feel less desperate to hold your attention and are less likely to lose it. In *Lost Souls*, Panavision gets credit for remote cranes and camera heads that let Kaminski get some magical shots, but the actors don't use their bodies very much. Everything comes from the face. And as movies are seen more by people at home than in theaters, makers choose shots that play better on small screens. *The Exorcist* has more head-to-toe shots of people in rooms that let you see the rooms and what's in them, let you see the characters in physical relation to each other. Handling expository material this way makes you look at the picture, deconstruct and interpret it. You do it automatically. Films shot up-close create a mosaic, as Marshall McLuhan said of the visually "cool" medium of television: you have to put the pieces together. You do that automatically too. But none of this fulfils a theory of film; it is done so that you, at home, watching a theatrical release, will have less trouble seeing details in a long shot on a small screen.

The trouble there is that *everything* gets emphasized. Once, the close-shot

was what you cut to *for* emphasis. In *Lost Souls*, Kaminski has reasons for going in close, but later, what has been overemphasized on the big screen will not feel so special on a small one. Everything will be the same size—TV size. It's a trap, sprung on film by television, but sprung on television too, and it won't go away till big screens for home use become truly big and widely affordable.

APPARENTLY, WHAT ALSO WON'T GO AWAY IS THE IDEA THAT CREATING fiction is the same as telling lies. No less than Vladimir Nabokov offered that fiction was born the day a little boy ran out of the woods, crying, "Wolf! Wolf!" and there was no wolf behind him. It seems profound. But fiction is not just lying: a lie intends to deceive the listener; fiction desires a confident attention to what you know is not strictly true. After all, it has been labelled *fiction*, hasn't it?

But what if it's not labelled? Or the label *does* intend to deceive? What if it's a website where the information might be inaccurate but (you assume) not deliberately so, and you surf in through a link and start reading about three film students who disappeared in the Maryland woods, and one year later...

Put it this way: can you sort out all the shots in Oliver Stone's *JFK* that are true archival/news footage, without picking any of the shots he faked?

There are two traditions at work here. One is the unreliable narrator. You have to "read through" this guy to get what the writer is really trying to say. One reason Nabokov celebrated lying is because he employed this narrator famously in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, less famously in *Despair*. The other tradition is the false document, whose famous ancestor is Daniel DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—to the end of his life, DeFoe insisted this account was true, nor was it the only time in his career that he said this of something he had written. Some of H. P. Lovecraft's "Cthulhu" tales fit; so do Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* and *Eaters of the Dead*.

By the time this essay goes to print, dumping on *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* may seem like hanging a dead witch. But *The Blair Witch Project* and its precursor website, its sequel and its second website, tried to have it both ways. The first website faked evidence (unreliable narrator?) to build interest in a film (false document). *Book of Shadows*, which foolishly purports to be a re-creation (a new unreliable narrator) in the manner of *Unsolved Mysteries*, is gibberish without reference to its website—a pack of lies. So a faked website promoted the first film; the second promotes a faked website. But the films and websites should agree. In *Book of Shadows*, we are told that Elly Kedward, the witch who started it all, was banished from Blair township and left in the woods, tied to a tree. At the website, a woodcut of her banishment shows her tied to a wagon.

Not merely a glitch in a movie in which we are told emphatically: "Film lies! Video tells the truth!" For the record, there is nothing tricky you can do to film that cannot be done to video; digital video lets you fake even

more. And there is nothing supernatural in a director showing a shot of a walkway that has fallen down and another of (same) walkway still in place; or of a wrecked car and (same car, later) not wrecked. Nothing cinematic about it either. Just card tricks. ♣

Lost Souls, New Line Cinema.

Director – Janusz Kaminski

Screenplay – Pierce Gardner

DP – Mauro Fiore

Cast: Winona Ryder (Maya), Ben Chaplin (Peter Kelson). With Elias Koteas and John Hurt.

The Exorcist, Warner Brothers, re-release.

Director – William Friedkin

Screenplay – William Peter Blatty, based on his novel.

Cast: Ellen Burstyn (Chris MacNeil), Max von Sydow (Father Merrin), Lee J. Cobb (Kinderman), Kitty Winn (Sharon), Jason Miller (Father Karras), Linda Blair (Regan).

Blair Witch 2: Book of Shadows, Artisan Entertainment.

Director – Joe Berlinger

Screenplay – Dick Beebe and Joe Berlinger

DP – Nancy Schreiber.

Cast: Jeffrey Donovan, Tristen Skyler, Stephen Barker Turner, Erica Leerhsen, Kim Director, Lanny Flaherty.



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The jurors for the 2001 Sunburst Award are John Clute, Candace Jane Dorsey, Phyllis Gotlieb, Monica Hughes, and Leon Rooke.

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Eleanor Rigby Day

Chris Turner

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS *THAT*?” I SAID. I TURNED TO Monkman, half-laughing. “Like: *what*?”

“You asshole,” Monkman said flatly.

“I mean, what the... Like, *crickets*? As *pets*?” I made a huffing sound to punctuate the incomprehensibility of it all.

“You prick,” Monkman said.

“Did you—?” Heard him that time. “*What*?”

“You heard me.”

“What’s up your ass? I mean, the guy bought fucking crickets for like pets. That’s pretty out there, dude.”

“Yeah?” Monkman stood up and folded his arms across his chest, like he was cross and about to like send me to my room without dessert or something.

“Well... Yeah.”

“The guy bought some crickets.”

“Yeah.”

“For pets.”

“Uh-huh.”

“On Eleanor Rigby Day.”

“*Yeah*, that’s what I... Oh, *fuck!*” I looked out into the mall. They were gone. I turned back to Monkman. “Seriously?”

“It’s October twelfth, man.”

“Oh, shit,” I said. It was Christmas. And I had just shot Santa Claus. So to speak. You know, *metaphorically*.

I HAD BEEN SERVING A TALL MAN IN A DECAYING TWEED SPORTCOAT AND a neatly pressed dress shirt made of something from Du Pont. The guy had stringy black hair, neatly parted and combed, his scalp showing through the strings. The clothes and the grooming and the guy’s self-consciously erect posture had struck me immediately as a vain attempt at appearing dignified, an attempt made all the more pathetic by its transparency. I had thought. Right away.

He had been shuffling around the glass display windows of spiders and reptiles and rodents—The Screamer Case, we called it, in honor of the reactions the animals got from the younger sisters and girlfriends of the teenage boys who usually bought them—shuffling around the case like he wanted to examine the merchandise but didn’t, like, know *how* to. Timid and jittery, like he didn’t want us to think he was shopping so we wouldn’t try to help him.

I approached him slowly, extra-congenial. “Need any help today, sir?” I said.

He sort of flinched. “Oh... Hmmm.” Pause. Glances: floor, ceiling, floor, display case, floor again. “Well. I don’t know...” He trailed off. His voice had a thin, wheezy quality to it, and he talked really slow. Overall, it was like—when he talked—like he was very slowly deflating. His face seemed deflated, too, drawn tight. I want to say it was pallid but I’m not sure if that’s the right word. Let’s just say his face looked like a way-killer hangover felt, but I could just *tell* that this guy didn’t get this way from a big night out or anything.

“Are you looking for a pet or food or just...?” I trailed off; tightly formulated questions seemed to freak out these skittish types.

“Oh,” he said. Did a three- or four-point check thing again: floor, ceiling, window. “Food?” he asked.

“Well the—” I almost told him that the rats, for example, were bought most of the time by big-snake owners as food, then thought better of it. “We’re a full service pet store, sir. We have food for almost any—”

“No.” Pause. “Not food.” Pause again. So slow; it was hard to tell if he was nervous or like *actually thought this slow*. Either way, I was getting annoyed. I fingered my eyebrow ring, waiting for a response. He bent suddenly, quickly, and pointed. “What are those?” he said, indicating a little dry cage full of crickets.

“Iguana food,” I blurted without thinking, thrown by the sudden movement. He stared up at me quizzically, and I sort of flicked my eyebrows and made a little *taa-daa* gesture like, *Get it?* He continued to stare at me, expressionless, his face appearing not so much humorless as like totally incapable of laughter.

“Crickets,” I said. “Those are, uh, crickets.”

"Hmmm," he said, drawing it out for like *half my fucking shift*, then resumed staring down at the little dry cage. I followed his gaze, fingering my eyebrow ring again and watching as the mass of bugs on the bottom of the cage writhed and crawled, seeming almost like one organic whole. I got sort of *into* it, too, I've got to admit. I'd had *mucho* bong-hits the night before, and I had that day-after sense of sort of childlike wonder and confusion that me and my boys call "The Stupids."

"Are they...expensive?" Slo-Mo said finally.

I guffawed. (Well, I just like sort of snorted, but I dig that word: *guffawed*.) "The crickets?"

"Yes, the...umm...the, ah, crickets. Are they expensive?" Still in that wheezy voice. He spoke with a sort of naive earnestness, like someone with a mental handicap. Maybe he even had one, but I doubt it, because mentally handicapped guys don't usually have that deflated, *defeated* look this guy had. They're usually sort of jolly.

"Uh, no," I said, still trying to wrap my head around this guy. *Fucking freak*, is what I was starting to think. "No, sir, they're not... They're, uh, 25¢ each. Plus tax." I made a kind of *taa-daaing* motion again—like ironic, you know?—but I was starting to think there was *not a chance in hell* this guy would catch it. "Only 25¢ apiece," I repeated, with a kind of mocking, salesman-y tone.

"Hmmm." He stood back up and started digging into his pockets. "So four would cost..." He considered it. I was about to answer when he said, "A dollar."

"Yup. Plus tax."

"Hmmm."

"Do you... Do you have any...any pets at home?"

"Well, no." Pause. (Of course.) "But I was thinking of getting one."

"Like a lizard or something?" I said. Like, suggestively. "We have iguanas and geckos and..."

"A lizard?" Time passed; my hair was getting longer. "No, I was looking..."

"David?" A woman's voice behind me, near the entrance. "*David?* What are you up to?" Friendly, but with a shrill quality to it. I turned, and there was this frumpy woman in a yellow-and-white K-Mart type sweatshirt and too-tight (for her) jeans coming up to us, trying to seem nonchalant. She had frizzy hair dyed blonde but with dark roots showing. She looked like the kind of woman you'd see eating Baskin-Robbins and scratching like *Nevada tickets* at the food court.

David waved at her, timid but with what on his face seemed like pleasure. Which is to say he was only grimacing slightly now.

"What are you up to?" she said again, still with that sort-of-shrill sound, like a mother worried about her kid but not wanting to seem worried about her kid.

"I was thinking of getting a pet," he said.

"Oh?" She looked at me.

"Uh, yeah. I was just asking... We were talking about lizards," I said.

"No," David said. He looked at me, then at her. "I was looking at those." He pointed to the crickets.

"Yes, but ..." I turned to her. "I was asking... I thought maybe he'd like to see our lizards."

"Those are crickets," he said.

"But I was thinking..."

"Is there a *problem*?" she said, sort of turning on me. Wanting it to still sound casual, though.

"I just thought he might like..." I turned to him. "Did you want to see..."

"Do you like the crickets, David?" she said.

"I was looking at them."

"I was... Look," I said, trying to address both of them. Trying to sound, like, authoritative. "I though maybe a lizard might interest you. Him."

She like turned on me *again*, if that's possible. "Did he ask to see the..."

"Now Judy," David said, still slow and thin, but sounding reasonable now. "He was helping me."

"Did you *ask* to see the lizards?" Judy said.

"I was looking at the crickets," David said. He squatted down. "I like watching them," he said, maybe with finality.

She stepped around me in the narrow aisle, knocking goldfish-food jars off the shelf but ignoring it. She squatted down beside him. "Which one do you like?" she asked. I thought I heard little-boy condescension now, and I wondered again about the mental-handicap thing.

"I was thinking maybe four," David said. "If there's just two, they might not... you know... *get along*." Talking to her—just to her—his speech grew more rapid, more relaxed. "But three, and there's the risk that two of them might become fast friends and exclude the other fellow. So I though perhaps four would be a good size for the group."

"Are you worried at all about two feuding couples?" she asked.

David paused, considering; I took to leaning against the display window a few paces away, happy to be ignored and trying not to laugh and become the centre of attention again.

"Hmmm," he said. "It doesn't seem likely." He looked up at me. "Do they pair off?"

"Do they...?" What *was* this shit, anyway? "They're *crickets*," I said.

"He knows *that*," Judy said.

"Yes, of course I know that. But they don't pair off, do they?"

"Well, they like..." To be honest, fucked if I knew. "I'm sure they *mate*. But, uh, normally, they're like... Well, look at them."

In the little cage, hundreds of crickets crawled all over each other, seeming to rise and fall like beer-foam bubbling in a glass after it's poured. And what I would have done right then for a... But anyway. "I mean, they're pretty, uh... *communal*."

"Yes, that's what I gathered," David said. "But still..." He turned to Judy, then back to the cage. "Why don't I get five? To be safe."

"That's what you want?" she said.

"Yes." Pause. "Five of them. A fine family they'll make." And then he sort of nodded. Judy turned up to me with a sort of shake of her head, like, *So there*.

So I got them their five crickets, David slowly hand-picking each one through a series of *No, the other ones* and *No, one more overs* and *Under that fellows*, etc. And then they wanted, like, *accessories*.

"Well, uh, our smallest cage is this one," I said, showing them the exact same cage we had like *a thousand* crickets living in, in the display. "It's \$9.95."

Judy and David glanced at each other, considering, him stealing occasional glances at the little plastic baggie that held his five crickets.

"We have... I mean, if you're investing in a pet, we have newts and salamanders starting at \$7.95, if you want something that, uh, lives longer," I told them.

"Oh," David said. He seemed taken aback.

"I mean, crickets are, like... They tend to..." Careful, now; Judy looked ready to pounce. How to put this? "They're not, uh, known for their longevity." Not bad.

"Well, maybe we should see the lizards," David said, doing that floor-ceiling-floor thing again.

"David," Judy said.

He met her gaze sheepishly. "Yes?"

"You like the crickets."

"Yes."

"You've decided to buy them."

"Yes." He dropped his eyes to the floor and kept them there.

"Well, then." She turned to me. Nodded. *So there*.

So there. So I got them a cage and some pebbles for the bottom and even a little fake-plastic-palm-tree thing for decoration and brought them up to the cash and rang it all in.

"Eighteen-oh-seven all together," I said.

"Oh," David said, looking off over my shoulder. I waited.

"What do they eat?" he said.

So I went into professional-pet-store-guy mode; I was sick of this shit. "Oh, they'll eat just about any vegetable," I said, kind of off the top of my head. "You can give 'em lettuce or spinach or something. Or just throw in some grass clippings or leaves, if you want to go the economical route. They're not fussy eaters at all." I was sure Monkman, seated beside me on a stool and flipping through a magazine, had to be just like biting through his lip holding it in, listening to this *spiel*. "They're very agreeable that way. Crickets."

"Oh," David said, and sort of looked down again, running his hand through his stringy hair. "All right."

And then Judy shot me a final die-a-slow-and-painful-death look, and they

were gone.

"SO WHAT'RE YOU GONNA DO, COOL GUY?" MONKMAN WAS SAYING.

Good fucking question. I had killed Santa Claus. It was Eleanor Rigby Day, and some poor guy who hadn't probably been to a mall since like *the '70s* had wanted some crickets, and I had been all mocking and ironic. I knew it, Monkman knew it, Judy knew it, and I could only hope David hadn't caught on. I needed to like check without him knowing I was checking.

"What about if I go find him and bring him, like, a 'free gift'?" I said.

"Like what? Like bringing that guy his dignity back, something like that?"

"Oh, man, come on. You're not helping." He wasn't, and that was harsh. I mean, Rigby Day wasn't an *official* holiday or anything. It was just this one day where it was like frowned upon to bug weird people. Like in the mall, for example—and how out-of-it was I that I didn't notice all of these freaks walking around the mall when I came in this morning?—but like in the mall, on Rigby Day, they asked you to leave if you were all stylish and stuff. Most of the kids who usually hang out there stayed home, or else dressed down and showed up for a goof. Security was usually all over them, though, and they'd throw you right out if they caught you snickering or anything.

It had started about five or six years ago, because there was a leftie government or something. Saying there was a "tyranny of style," a "fascism of cool." I remember that—I was like fourteen at the time, and I'd never heard the word "fascism" before, except in a couple of punk songs. But so they had decided to declare one day of the year "Eleanor Rigby Day," kind of like there's, you know, National Beet Month and like Kidney Disease Awareness Week and stuff like that. And they named it after that Beatles song. You know: *All the lonely people, where do they all come from?* And so on. And I guess some of these fed-up fucked-up guys decided to take it seriously, and they like occupied a bunch of public places. I remember *that*, too—these guys on the news who like hadn't showered since Lennon was shot and had independently focusing eyes and shit all saying, "We've got rights, too" and "We won't be ignored" and stuff.

To be honest, it seemed to be working. Last year at the mall, I remember seeing them at the start of the day wandering around aimlessly, kind of like zombies in a horror flick, almost bumping into each other, even. But by the end of the day, they were sitting in little groups and stuff, talking and laughing, buying each other drinks and snacks. Acting like regular people.

Which is, I guess, why Monkman was being so harsh. Because I had forgotten. Because I had gone and ruined the illusion, at least for this guy David.

"So what, then? What should I do?" I asked.

"Fuck, Bri, just go find the dude and talk to him."

"Like apologize?"

"Fuck, what're you on? No, don't apologize. Just like talk. Like he's a

fucking human being, for chrissake."

"Yeah. Okay. Yeah."

So I ran out into the mall and searched around for Judy and David. I found plenty of pairs and trios and whole gangs of people who *could* have been them, but not them. I even went out into the parking lot and looked around, standing there by the doors trying to find a yellow-and-white sweater or a tattered tweed sportcoat, but nothing.

Eventually, a security guard came out and grabbed me by the arm. "Go back to your store, kid," he said.

"But I was just looking—"

"Just go back to your store."

"No, there's this couple who I was helping, and..." As we stood there, a few people were coming in and out of the mall, and one or two of them saw me out there and sort of slouched down and shuffled away, like I was this mean dog they whose eye they didn't want to catch.

"You're not helping anyone out here," the guard said.

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, kid," the guard said. "It'll be back to normal tomorrow." ❀

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In memoriam:

Gordon R. Dickson

CANADIANS HAVE AN INTERESTING WAY OF CLAIMING
what is ours.

We take pride in our writers, make them eligible for awards, talk them up to the rest of the world. But not only do we do this with the home-grown and still-there variety, we do so with writers who were born in Canada and then moved on, usually to the US (think A.E. van Vogt). We also do it with those writers who were born elsewhere and then moved to Canada (think William Gibson), and even those writers who were born elsewhere, moved here for at least a part of their formative years, and then moved elsewhere again (think Sean Stewart).

For some odd reason, the name of Gordon R. Dickson didn't often come into play in this cross border do-si-do. Gordy was born in Edmonton, but he and his family moved to Minnesota in 1937. While this didn't completely rule him out as a part of that large squad of sometime Canadians, it did seem that his was not often the name bandied about when in sudden fits of national insecurity Canadian fans or writers would pull someone out of the hat to wave in a frantic effort to prove that there was indeed something of worth that had come from the frozen wastes.

Our tenacious grip was enough, however, to look at Gordy and admire him as one of the few from around these parts to actually Make It. Early on you could certainly have suffered a major accident working in the saw mill and still be able to count with your fingers the number of nebulous or real Canadians who had at least gotten more than their toe in the door (van Vogt certainly, and Phyllis Gotlieb and Judy Merrill), and so it was not only with pride but also with hope that you could look at someone like Gordy and think "Hey, I can do that too."

Well, maybe not exactly. Fifty-five novels and a whole bunch of other books is a mighty high bar to set. Couple with that the fact that the man was generous with his time and also that he lived life large, and there's a lot to aspire to. Not so much that I'm overwhelmed, though. I was lucky enough to have met him, many years ago, and I still appreciate the feeling that he gave me, the sense that I counted.

Three Hugos and a Nebula. The *Dorsai* books, *Time Storm*, *The Dragon and the George*, the *Hoka* books, *Spacepaw*, loads more. He left a tremendous legacy, and the science fiction community will certainly continue to miss him. 🍁

— Derryl Murphy

Feng Burger

John Aegard

AT FIRST GLANCE, BURGER PODS LOOK PRETTY unremarkable. They're squat, burger-shaped trailers that sit on vacant lots or street corners and dispense fast food to the masses. Very little there beyond the obvious—until you consider their origins.

See, the Burger Pod started out on a computer screen in a Hong Kong engineering firm. The Chinese are particular about their designs, and with good reason. A design with good *feng shui*—one that satisfies the universe's sense of metaphor—attracts *chi*, the energy that raises mountains and pushes rivers and draws good fortune near.

Whether by accident or design, no one can say, but the Burger Pods have potent *feng shui*. Where normal men would see nothing but gleaming stainless steel cabinets and a charbroiling grill, a *feng shui* practitioner would see arms and hands cradling the Burger Pod's occupant and bathing her in *chi*. Alas, those occupants were unable to deliberately manipulate this *chi*, like a sorcerer might. But in the spare moments when patties didn't need flipping and onions didn't need slicing, they daydreamed, and the *chi* took it from there.

ADELLE TURNER ARRIVED FOR HER FIRST DAY AS A BURGER PODDER IN a rusty blue station wagon that had a permanent driver-side tilt of about five degrees. She lumbered around the Pod, doing all of her outside checks.

Master gas valve, pilot light, alarm, all okay. Then she unlocked the padlock on the door, turned herself sideways, and heaved herself up the two steps into the Pod.

More checks. Grill fire, refrigerator temp, patty supply, condiment supply. She ticked each item off on her clipboard, then sat down for a rest. All the activity had her wheezing, and she didn't want to be all sweaty while she was serving people.

While she waited for her breath to come back, she pulled a copy of *People* out of her purse. Michelle Kwan was on the cover, eyes screwed shut in concentration, a slight smile on her face, left skate carving a spray of ice, right leg stuck straight out towards the reader. Adelle turned to Michelle's story and read through it slowly, pacing herself so that the magazine would last all day.

In another part of Adelle's head, a daydream took form. Powered by the *chi* flow, it rocketed through the fume hood and up into the stratosphere.

There, it found one of its kin.

ADELLE STANDS ON THE BLUELINE OF THE HOCKEY RINK, WEARING HER tiny black outfit and expensive figure skates. She hears a slapping noise, looks up, sees four men in hockey uniforms charging her. She nimbly steps around them, then turns to follow the action. A puck tic-tac-toes between the men, and winds up in the net. Beacons flash, horns roar, the crowd goes wild, and Adelle is left wondering whose fantasy she's living.

In the midst of the celebration, the goal-scorer spots her. He abandons his teammates, drops his gloves and stick and helmet and skates up to her, bowing slightly. He extends his hand, and she takes it. They skate to the center of the rink. "I've Had The Time of My Life"—the song from *Dirty Dancing*, one of Adelle's favorites—starts. The man takes her effortlessly up in his arms, and skates in a spiral outwards from the faceoff dot. As he skates, the hockey scenery vanishes; first the other players, then the nets and the bluelines and the center lines. All of the lights dim except for one, a spotlight, which follows them precisely.

He looks up at her and grins. "Hey, this is *my* daydream you're messing with."

She shrugs at him, grinning back, and he throws her high, high enough so that she can nearly touch the rafters. When she falls, he catches her gently, as if she were a spun crystal vase.

They circle the arena, waving at the applauding fans. Adelle notices that behind the glass of the boards, the fans' faces are blank, mere flesh-colored ovals that hoot and holler at the correct moments. But the face of the man skating with her is different; it is fully defined, square-jawed, rugged, framed with stubble and short, curly hair. A Greek god in a hockey sweater is her ice-dancing partner. As she looks at the sweater, it drops away, revealing a tuxedo with a satin-black tie and cummerbund, perfect to match her outfit.

"That's better," she says, eyes locked on his. He glances down, grins, and

takes her gently by the chin. Adelle closes her eyes, waits for the kiss...

She opens her eyes. He's gone.

"Hey, come back," she whispers.

No one responds. Even the audience is quiet.

"Hey!" someone shouts from the other end of the arena. It's him. He skates up to her, frowning, like he's really irritated.

"I'm sorry. I had to serve a customer."

Adelle doesn't mind. She takes him in her arms and they dance around the rink, serenaded by Celine Dion and Mariah Carey and Madonna and Bryan Adams...

ADELLE TORE THE PICTURE OF MICHELLE KWAN OUT OF *PEOPLE* AND PUT it up with a magnet. She got better at calling up the daydream; all she had to do was glance at the picture and think herself there.

Business was slow on her end, but her new friend was pretty busy. Between one and two PM, he was usually unavailable. When he was there and she wasn't, he was playing hockey, though he always stopped the game when she appeared.

ONE DAY, HE ASKS HER WHAT HER NAME IS.

"Michelle," she says, without thinking.

"I'm Danny."

Above them, on the big hockey scoreboard, the television screens flash into an animated "MICHELLE AND DANNY," complete with fireworks.

"I'm getting tired of this place," he says. "Will you take me somewhere else?"

She nods. "Okay. How about tomorrow?"

A COLLECTIONS AGENT WAS WAITING FOR HER THAT NIGHT. HE STROLLED up beside her as she huffed up the walkway to her apartment building's lobby.

"Miss Turner?"

She flinched.

"American Express wants to know when they're going to get their money." He said it just loud enough to be overheard.

Adelle didn't respond; she just concentrated on getting her lobby key to work in the sticky lock.

He stepped closer, close enough so that she could smell his cherry breath mints. "When can I tell them to expect it, Miss Tuner?"

The key snapped into place. Adelle pushed the door open, stepped through, then let it swing shut in the collection man's face.

ADELLE DIDN'T GET MUCH SLEEP THAT NIGHT. SHE HAD TO DISCONNECT the phone; the bill collector was dialing her every 15 minutes. Then, in the silence that followed, she worried about where she was going to take Danny.

She found herself prowling her little apartment, looking for things he'd find interesting. She did this until three AM, when a solution presented itself.

The next morning, when she got to work, she plugged her little portable CD player into the Burger Pod and cued up one of Bonnie Raitt's greatest hits collections.

Then she took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

ADELLE IS AT CENTER STAGE, WEARING JEANS, A FRINGEY LEATHER jacket, and a combination earpiece-mike. Behind her, her band plays the opening to "Something to Talk About." She walks over to stage right, and the roadie hands her a guitar, a big round one like the kind that old blues musicians use. She takes in the band as she walks back to the mike; the faceless bassist is bald and plays an upright, the faceless drummer wears a tank top and Vuarnets.

"Hey, guys," she calls, and the crowd roars back. It's faceless, all except for one, who's front-row-center. Danny. She waves at him, and he blows a kiss in return.

The band steams through "Something" and "Angel from Montgomery" and "Women Be Wise" and "Papa Come Quick." As Adelle sings, more and more faces pop into the crowd; real faces, not the normal pink crowd-scene ovals. They work their way to the front, shouting, waving, crowding Danny.

She looks at the set list, taped to the floor at center stage, and sees that "Love Letters" is next. "Love Letters" is a duet that Bonnie did with Elton John. It's one of Adelle's favorites. She jumps down into the bouncers' row, reaches over the barricades, grabs Danny, and hauls him up onto the stage.

"It's a duet!" she says to him. "I need your help."

"I don't know the words!" he shouts, and pretends to push her away.

"I can always sing it with the bassist," she shouts back.

"He doesn't even have a mouth."

In the end, he lets her teach him, and after about 45 minutes, they've got it down. The band is patient, but why shouldn't they be? They're her props. After three or four perfect "Love Letters," they stop playing Bonnie Raitt and start playing Michelle & Danny, spontaneous music that gets sillier and sillier until they're both lying on the stage, giggling.

Danny looks at his watch. "I have to go," he says. "The lunch rush is coming."

The thought of Danny leaving hits her hard, pushes her into doing something bold.

"I want to be with you tonight."

Her voice goes out over the PA, and the audience roars. Danny looks shocked, but she carries on. "I don't want to be interrupted tonight, Danny. I love you."

The audience whistles and stomps its approval. Danny kisses her for a good minute, then steps back, waves, and vanishes.

"Thank you," Adelle says to the crowd. "Thank you very, very much."

Adelle checked both the concert hall and the arena every five minutes that afternoon, but Danny must have been busy, because he was never there.

That night, she skipped the Burger Pod deposit and headed straight home. There was really no deposit to make, except for the nine bucks from the five cheeseburgers and three Cokes she'd had. After less than half an hour at home, just long enough to throw a couple changes of clothes and a blanket into a plastic bag, she drove across the street to the mall and spent the last money in her bank account on an inflatable mattress.

It'll be tight, she figured, but it ought to fit.

Then she drove the thirty minutes back out to the Burger Pod, got the mattress settled on the floor, inflated it with the little car-accessory pump that'd come in the same box, lay down, and waited.

"DANNY? YOU THERE?"

The concert hall is empty. It echoes her voice nicely.

"Danny?"

He strolls out from backstage, casually dressed in jeans, a dress shirt, and a leather vest. In his right hand he's got a flower, in his left, a bottle.

They embrace and kiss for a few minutes, then sit facing each other on the stage floor. Danny produces a pair of long, slender glasses and pours the champagne. It's delightful stuff, bubbly and sweet.

"I like this," he says. "It's better when there's nobody watching."

She grins, tosses back the rest of her champagne, and reaches for the top button on his vest. He cooperates for a little while, but then stops her.

"Aren't you afraid of splinters?" he asks, rubbing the plywood stage floor.

She nods, and changes the floor to satin sheets over carpet foam.

He laughs. "That's okay, but—" he looks up at the lighting rig "—don't you think we should have our own place? Something we can build together?"

"Okay." The concert hall vanishes. "You go first."

HE MAKES ROLLING PASTURE, A HILL IN THE DISTANCE, WOODS, A BABBLING brook to subdivide it all.

She makes a little house with maroon trim and a white picket fence.

He makes a barn and a corral.

She makes horses and a dog with puppies and a cat with kittens.

He makes a hockey rink out in the backyard, with bleachers to seat five hundred.

She punches him on the shoulder.

"It's only for when you're not here," he protests, and she lets it stay.

They add some trimmings; a little garden, some gnomes and flamingos, a horseshoe hanging over the barn door. Then they go inside the house. This time Danny lets her take off his shirt.

They baptize every room in the house that night. First, the living room,

on bearskin rugs. Then the laundry room, because Adelle heard about that on television once. Then the kitchen, on top of the huge island counter. Finally, the bedroom, on king-size satin sheets. They fall asleep entwined together, and Adelle is happier than she can ever recall.

Days pass on the ranch. Other dreamers come by, people from Burger Pods all over America. Adelle receives them graciously, and serves them lemonade. They all marvel at the colors in Adelle's flower beds and the sweetness of her lemonade.

Danny goes out and explores the dreamplace. The other Podders are setting up their own spots. He comes home every night and tells her about the things he's seen; homesteads and palaces and spaceports and tall ships. Adelle stays home, tinkering with the ranch.

One day, a knocking awakes her from a nap. She stands up, goes to the door, looks outside. No one is there. The knocking gets louder, surrounds her.

"Hello?" she calls, and the dreamplace tumbles away.

ADELLE OPENED HER EYES. SHE WAS BACK IN THE GLISTENING STEEL interior of the Burger Pod.

The door thudded. Someone was knocking on it.

She reached for the stove handle, to pull herself up, but she had to go slow—her head was woozy. *Ah yes*, she said to herself, thinking back. *I skipped supper.*

The visitor knocked again. Adelle struggled to her feet, turned the deadbolt, and opened the door. It was morning outside. Her visitor was Mr. Thorpe, the man from the Burger Pod company. She shuddered to think at what her saw when he looked at her, unshowered and sweaty, in a old purple track suit.

"Morning," Thorpe said. He craned his neck to see around her, and for the first time ever Adelle was glad for her bulk.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to let you know that we're—we're not doing as well here as we thought we would."

"I'm sorry—"

He shook his head. "Not your fault. There's just not enough people coming down here off the Interstate. We're going to try it for another week, but I don't see that changing." He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief—without the air conditioning on, it was stifling hot in the Pod. "We're probably going to move it up the highway, about 60 or 70 miles."

"But that's too far for me to drive." It came out like a whine, but Adelle didn't care.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just thought you should know." He left without another word.

Adelle got a Coke out of the fridge, turned the air conditioner on, and

sat down to think.

She'd been in the dreamplace with Danny for a few days—maybe a week—but according to her watch, it'd only been overnight in the real world. At a week a night, she counted on the calendar, they had a month and a half together before the Burger Pod went away.

She closed her eyes, jumped back to the dreamplace, and tried to find him. He wasn't at the ranch, or in the arena, or the concert hall—he was off wandering somewhere, or he was busy working his Pod.

Finally, she gave up, pulled out her checklist, and started getting ready for the day's work.

TWO DAYS PASS IN THE DREAMPLACE BEFORE DANNY COMES BACK. HE sneaks up on Adelle as she sits in her rocking chair on the porch of the house.

"Boo!" he says, jumping in front of her.

She yelps and nearly goes over backwards in her rocker. He helps her up, grinning as he does, hugging her.

"Where have you been?" she whispers.

"Oh, just wandering," he says, stroking her hair. "There are some really interesting—"

"You've been gone for two days!"

He looks puzzled. "No, I haven't. It's only been a few hours—"

Adelle doesn't let him finish. "They're taking away my Pod."

"Aw, no." He hugs her harder. "Is this—is it goodbye?"

"No." She pushes him back so she can look him in the eye. "I'll do anything. I don't want this to end."

"All right." He sighs. "Okay. What's happening to your Pod? How long do we have?"

She tells him about Mr. Thorpe's visit.

Danny's face turns thoughtful. "Tell me where you are."

She hesitates.

"I need to know, Michelle."

"My name's not Michelle. It's Adelle."

"I don't care what your name is. Just tell me where you are. Please."

She does.

"I'll be back soon, Mich— Adelle. I have to go and take care of some things." He gives her a little kiss on the chin, then vanishes.

ADELLE DIDN'T GO HOME FOR THE NEXT THREE DAYS. *WHY BOTHER?* she thought. She had burgers to eat and Coke to drink and enough clothes to last for a few days, and she could wash up at the rest station bathroom a mile down the Interstate.

On Thursday she didn't even bother to open the Burger Pod. She woke up a couple of times to eat, and once to shout "we're closed!" at someone who was tapping on the cage, but aside from that, she spent every moment

in the dreamplace, waiting for Danny to come back.

IT'S FRIDAY IN THE REAL WORLD WHEN DANNY REAPPEARS. ADELLE RUNS to him, embraces him, leaves a few tears on his shoulder.

"Hey, hey," he says, holding her back at arms' length so he can address her directly. "I've got some good news. Really great news."

She sniffs and looks him in the eye. His are shining.

"Something wonderful's happening," Danny said. "I'm just a little ways away, in someone else's Burger Pod. I'll be there tomorrow, probably around noon."

"Stay here for a while?" she asks.

"No. I have to get some other things arranged."

She holds him tight, but he gently slips away. "I love you!" he calls.

After he's gone, she goes up onto the porch, turns out the lights, and locks the door. He's coming to meet her, in real life. He's coming to meet Adelle the chubby Burger Pod lady rather than Adelle the nimble figure-skating guitar goddess.

That terrifies her.

ADELLE WENT HOME THAT NIGHT. THE NEXT MORNING, SHE GOT UP early and put on her best outfit, the one she wore to job interviews. She even dug her makeup case out from under her sink and put a tiny bit of mascara on her lashes.

The she went to the Burger Pod, turned on the air conditioning, and tried to read a magazine while she waited for Danny.

AT ONE O'CLOCK, A BLACK TAURUS PULLED INTO THE VACANT LOT. A MAN—a normal-looking guy, maybe thirty, with short sandy hair and a white Adidas T-shirt—got out.

"Hello?" he called, as he walked up to the counter. "Adelle?" His voice wasn't far from the musical growl he'd had in the dream.

"Danny?"

"Yeah."

They looked at each other for a little while.

"Come on inside," she said, finally.

"Naw," he said. "Why don't you come out, and we can get started?"

She looked puzzled.

"We're gonna leave here, Adelle, and we're gonna take your Burger Pod with us."

"Where will we go?"

He grinned. "Montana."

DANNY JACKED UP THE BURGER POD AND MADE QUICK WORK OF ITS parking lock with a pair of bolt cutters. Then he changed its license plates, got it hooked onto his Taurus, made sure that the gas lines were all safe for

transport, and pulled out. The little sedan didn't much like pulling the load, but they were able to make fifty miles an hour on the flat stretches.

"Your boss come around often?" he asked Adelle, about five minutes after they got started.

"Not really."

"Good. This thing ain't exactly inconspicuous."

THEY SPOKE ONLY RARELY WHILE ON THE ROAD. ADELLE ASKED DANNY about his plans a couple of times, but he refused to tell her. He wanted to keep it a surprise.

Adelle slept a lot of the way, hoping that the dreamplace would come. It didn't, although at one point she woke up and Danny was holding her hand, and it felt okay by her.

IT TOOK THEM ABOUT 24 HOURS TO REACH MONTANA. THREE HOURS after they passed the state line, Danny pulled the Taurus off the Interstate and onto some back roads. As the sedan made its way across gravel and sand and the odd real road, Adelle started feeling something. It pushed into her slowly, starting with the pit of her stomach and then spreading outwards. By the time it reached her toes and her forehead, she felt like she was vibrating, felt like every one of her Christmases and birthdays and Halloweens and Easters were being wrapped into one on the road ahead.

"You got it too, eh?" Danny asked.

"Yeah," she said, afraid that she might cry if she said more.

He turned the truck off the road and onto a little rutted road. The road meandered a bit, then led to a bluff with a stunning view of a little Montana canyon.

"Let me show you something," Danny said. He parked, hopped out of the car and helped Adelle to the edge of the bluff.

"Oh, my Lord—" she said.

Below, in the valley, dozens of Burger Pods were lined up in precise, rectangular formation. As she watched, a pickup truck backed another one into position.

"We've all come," Danny said. "Everyone I could find, they've all come. We can all be together now."

"WHERE'S YOUR BURGER POD?" SHE ASKED DANNY, AFTER HE HAD driven down into the canyon and backed hers into its space.

"I couldn't bring it. We'll have to share, if that's okay."

"Will it work if we share?"

"I think so."

Danny went to park the car, and Adelle let herself into her Pod. A nasty smell hit her as soon as she stepped inside. *The meat's turned*, she thought. Sure enough, when she opened the fridge, she got it full in the face. She opened the customer window and called out to see if the fellow next door

had a garbage pail or something, but nobody responded.

It's not so bad, she thought. *Can wait until tomorrow.* She reached up into the high cupboards and got her air mattress.

"I can inflate that for you," Danny said from the doorway. If he noticed the smell, he didn't show it.

"No, that's fine."

Danny pulled down the Pod's little folding bench and sat down, with his hands on his knees. "I guess we did it," he said.

Adelle blinked away a tear as she unrolled the mattress on the floor.

"I guess we should go," Danny said. "Everyone'll be waiting for us."

Adelle sat down on the mattress and closed her eyes. The dreamplace slid over her like a quilt.

THAT NIGHT, THE BURGER PODDERS JOIN DANNY AND ADELLE ON THEIR ranch for some barbecue.

"This tastes awfully familiar," says a wolf-man, after sampling the first of the hamburgers to come off of Danny's grill. Everyone laughs.

Finally, they settle down to a long table. A man wearing a red velvet beret proposes a toast, a poem that brings tears to Adelle's eyes.

They clink glasses, and their golden age begins.

"YOU'EVER THINK ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON OUTSIDE?" DANNY ASKS Adelle a couple of weeks later, as they're picking lemons from their tree.

Adelle stands up on tiptoe to examine a lemon, and hopes that Danny will change the subject.

He doesn't. "I wonder how long it's been, out there."

"I don't know."

"Do you think anyone's looking for us?"

"I hope not." Adelle is surprised at how quickly that comes out.

They're silent for a minute.

"How long can we do this?" Danny asks.

"I don't want to stop."

"But do you think it's right?"

"We have everything, we have friends, each other..."

"Yeah. But listen, I was thinking, maybe we could try something on the outside for a while. Something a little more real."

Adelle makes her voice as non-negotiable as she can. "You can't have me out there."

"No?"

"No."

Danny drops the subject.

DANNY'S SILENT WHEN HE COMES TO BED THAT NIGHT. WHEN ADELLE climbs on top of him and starts making overtures, he trembles.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

He breathes deeply, hoarsely. "I tried to go back."

Adelle slides down next to him, and tries to sound casual. "How are things out there?"

"I don't know. I didn't make it." His voice cracks. "It hurt. God, it hurt really bad, like I was on fire. Something's happening to us."

"I'm sorry," she says, but she feels like she's lying.

"I don't know what it is, but something's happening—"

Adelle squirms her arm under Danny's neck and pulls him to her. "The dream's so strong here, I bet the world doesn't matter anymore," she murmurs. "I bet we could go on here forever..."

"JESUS."

Sheriff Grant could smell the funk all the way from the bluff. Down in the valley, row upon row of stolen Burger Pods lay baking in the sun. Each Pod held a single, desiccated corpse, except for one with North Dakota plates, which had two. Mass starvation, the first man on the scene had said, but the coroner corrected him: mass dehydration.

Mass dehydration. That was something new to Grant.

The Pods' license plates were from all over. From his vantage, Grant could see New York, Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Washington State. That made him glad; he could turn over primary responsibility to the feds on this one. *They* could talk to CNN.

"Burger trailer cults," Grant muttered to himself, as he walked back to his patrol car. "What'll they goddamn think of next?" ♣

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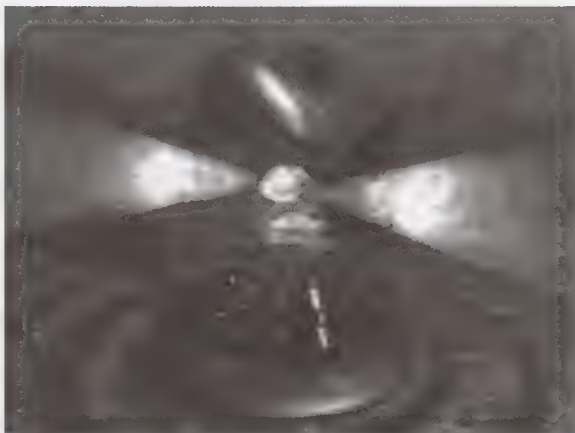
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Shelter From the Storm

Mark Anthony Brennan

THE WEASEL WAS DEAD, BUT IT HAD MANAGED TO almost chew its front paw right off. As he removed the carcass from the leg-hold trap, Michael shuddered with revulsion at the sight of the half-eaten front limb.

“How can they do that?” he asked as he stuffed the weasel into the filthy hockey bag.

“It’s amazing the things we do to survive.” Ray was looking up at the giant cedars and Douglas firs that surrounded them. The tops of the trees were lost in the mist. Everything was dripping wet.

Michael scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” said Ray, glancing down at Michael crouched at his feet. “Shit, Michael, it’s not always about you.” Ray strode off uphill, leaving Michael behind to reset the trap.

Michael fumed as he busied himself with the contraption. Just what *was* it about then?

Ray’s lovemaking the night before had been rougher than usual. Way too rough. Michael didn’t say anything at the time, although there were several times when he had wanted to cry out in pain. But in the morning, just before they got up, Michael felt compelled to mention it.

"Ray."

"Hmm." Ray was still half asleep.

"You know, that really hurt last night."

Ray groaned and rolled over, facing away from Michael.

"Ray, did you mean to? Did you mean to hurt me?"

Ray sighed. "What do you think?" he growled.

I don't know, thought Michael as he finished with the trap. *I just don't know.*

He stood up, shouldering the hockey bag. With the weasel added to the five rabbits that Ray had shot, it was starting to get heavy. Off-balance, he clambered awkwardly over the moss- and slime-covered undergrowth.

Just before he reached the top of the ridge over which Ray had disappeared, a sudden gust of wind shook the branches of the huge evergreens above him. Michael was hit by a shower of water shaken loose from the trees. He shivered as an icy drop hit the back of his neck beneath his mackinaw.

As he looked up, Michael cringed to prevent any more water from getting under his collar. The branches up there were still swaying. The trees were creaking now, and there was a whistling sound as the wind whipped through the forest. The mist, which until a moment ago had just been hanging in the air, was now quickly on the move.

Something didn't feel right. It was overcast, damp and cold—a typical west-coast day. But it wasn't stormy. This sudden wind just didn't feel right.

Michael dropped the bag and scrambled back in the direction of the cabin. They had passed through a clearing not long before. It only took him a few minutes to reach it. It was about the size of a football field—enough to give him a chance to survey the sky. The wind was really howling now.

The cloud cover was low, forming a gray roof just above the tops of the trees. Off to the right there was a darkness within the clouds. It rolled and writhed like something alive—like a tangled mass of monstrous snakes. The darkness had almost taken up a quarter of the sky. And it was heading their way.

Holy shit! Ray! "Ray!"

Michael ran headlong through the forest screaming at the top of his lungs, "Ray! Ray!"

His slipped and fell several times before he reached the spot where he'd dropped his bag. Ray was just appearing over the ridge. He had his rifle up.

"What the fuck is it?" Ray looked more annoyed than concerned.

"Come on, Ray," gasped Michael, almost collapsing into him. He grabbed Ray by the front of the jacket and yanked. "Come on, it's the storm."

"What?"

"The *storm*. The *black* storm."

"Jesus!" Ray didn't need any more convincing. He followed Michael down the ridge.

"Leave that," yelled Michael as the two of them raced through the forest

in the direction of the cabin.

"Oh, right." Ray threw the rifle aside.

By the time they reached the cabin, more than half the sky was black. Long, slender fingers of darkness were wending their way through the trees, flowing out over the garden patch below the cabin. It was almost upon them.

Ray burst through the front door first, Michael stumbling in behind him. Michael automatically closed and bolted the door, not even stopping to think that it would do no good whatsoever. Ray was already at his side of the room, clamping the shackle to his wrist. Michael followed suit at the opposite wall.

Then they sat there, each chained to the wall, staring at each other across the room. They were panting from exhaustion. Their clothes were ripped and each of them had bleeding gashes across their face and hands.

"Here," said Ray tossing his shackle key over the living room furniture. Michael didn't react in time—the key-ring hit him in the face. He removed the key from his shackle and threw it at Ray. Ray caught it, of course.

The wind pounded the front window. It was pitch black out there. Fortunately, they'd left the lights on in the cabin, not expecting to come home until dark.

Michael's stomach heaved with fear as he saw the black tendrils creeping under the front door. The black fingers grew fatter and merged together, forming an ever-widening pool that seeped across the floor.

Michael looked over at Ray. "It's okay, Michael. We'll be okay," he said softly.

Then it started.

The first part was always like a bad acid trip. It was freaky, but at least you were still yourself. Ray loomed up in front of Michael. He seemed so close, pushing out everything else in the room. All of his facial features looked heavy and large—his nose, his chin, his eyebrows. He was a grotesque troll. It was weird, other-worldly. But Michael wasn't scared. In fact he didn't feel anything—he watched with calm detachment as Ray transformed before his eyes. Then...

He rattled his chain in anger and frustration. How dare they imprison a noble warrior? And to be thrown into the same dungeon as that...that *thing*. That vile, repulsive thing.

He glowered at the creature chained to the opposite wall of the stinking stone cell. It was twice the size of a man. Its squat, tightly muscled body was shaped vaguely like that of a dog. The body had some filthy fur, but it was patchy and mangy-looking, as though it had a skin disease. The bald head was monstrously proportioned, almost as large as the body, and was obscenely pink and wrinkled. It had a huge, gaping mouth filled with sharp teeth. Bulbous, unevenly shaped eyes sprouted from the top of its head.

The creature was rattling and pulling on its chain too, snarling and growling as it did so. With disgust, he noticed that the creature had been gnawing at its shackled wrist. There was a gash of red, pulpy flesh with a

white gleam of bone. Blood was splattered on the metal bracelet and chain.

"You filth! I'll *kill* you!" he screamed. The creature roared back at him.

If only he had his weapon, he would hack this monster to pieces. It wasn't a matter of duty or honor—he just *hated* this creature. He was consumed with a burning desire to hurt, to maim, to destroy. If he could only get free, he would kill this thing with his bare hands—gouge out its eyes, tear out its throat.

"God damn these chains!" His wrist was getting chafed from his efforts to break free.

On the far wall, the metal plate holding the chain to the stone wall was wobbling. Noticing this, the creature pulled on the chain even more frantically. Two of the four bolts came loose. The creature reached over and got the talons of its front paws in behind the plate. It screamed with the effort as it shook the plate up and down. The creature fell over backwards as the metal plate suddenly came away from the dungeon wall.

His plate would not budge. He was not afraid—he was just livid with anger that the other prisoner was loose.

"Come and get me! C'mon. I'll kill you!"

The creature stood up on its hind legs and strode towards him. It held the freed chain in its paw. With a roar it brought its front limb back, then swung the chain towards his head. He brought his arm up. He managed to block the blow, but was bowled over sideways by the force of the impact. The creature pounced on top of him. It had its chain at his throat and was pressing down with all its might. He kicked and squirmed but he was firmly pinned to the ground.

"Argh!" Nothing more than a gurgle came forth as he tried to scream. The creature's panting, dripping mouth was only inches away. The smell was overpowering—it was rotten, foul. He pummeled its head with his fists. He was dizzy—his head started to spin...

The monster's face was melting, changing. The chain slackened, fell away. It was that troll in front of him again. *I'm Michael*, he thought absently. *That's Ray. He's not going to kill me.*

Behind the troll's head there was a light. Michael shifted, sitting more upright. He could see over the troll's shoulder now. There, bathed in a bright light by the front door, stood a man dressed in flowing robes. He had long, straight hair and a beard, and was smiling at Michael. It was the kind of smile that puts you at ease—lets you know that everything is all right.

"Michael, Michael."

Ray had his hands on Michael's shoulders and was peering intently into his eyes.

"Are you okay? Oh God, Michael. I'm so sorry."

Ray reached over and grabbed the key. He unlocked his shackle as he scrambled across the room to get the other key.

Michael looked around the room. The strange light and the man had disappeared. The wind was still howling outside, but there was daylight out

the front window. The storm had passed. Michael peered at the four splintered holes in the wooden wall across the living room.

How did that happen?

"Michael, are you hurt bad?" asked Ray as he unlocked Michael's metal bracelet. "God, I'm sorry."

Michael arm was throbbing where the chain had hit him. His neck hurt too, and it was hard to swallow. But he was okay. He glanced down at Ray's wrist. It was scraped red and raw, but there was no gaping wound. Of course there wasn't.

"I'm okay," croaked Michael.

Ray threw his arms around him. The two men held each other in a tight embrace for a few seconds.

"Ray?"

"Hmm?"

"Why aren't we like this more often?"

Ray pulled away, frowning. "Jesus Christ, Michael. Don't talk like that. Anyone would think we were...you know."

Yes, of course. How silly of me.

Michael thought of the man standing in the strange light.

"Don't take His name in vain. Please, Ray. You know I don't like it."

"You're not an altar boy anymore," said Ray, standing up. "Why are you so devoted? Don't you know what the Bible says about people like you?"

Thanks, Ray. Just hit me where it hurts.

"Like me?" replied Michael. "What about you?"

"I'm not gay. Remember?"

"Yeah, right. C'mon, Ray. We live together, we—"

"Fuck you." Ray turned and stormed out the front door, leaving Michael to pick himself up off the living room floor.

MICHAEL STIRRED. HE REACHED OVER BUT RAY WASN'T THERE. IN FACT, the sheets weren't even warm—Ray must have gotten out of bed some time ago.

Michael had been dreaming. In the dream he was a child—an altar boy again. Jesus Christ was scolding him, telling him to stand up for himself. The other altar boys wouldn't listen—they kept teasing Michael, calling him names. Michael looked to Jesus Christ (or was it his father?) but there was no sympathy in his face.

Father.

Then Michael remembered the vision in the strange light. Now there was sympathy in *that* face. And it was more than just sympathy—it had been reassuring. For the first time in God knows how long, Michael felt that there was hope.

Michael gave a deep, shaky sigh and lifted back the covers. He decided to go and look for Ray.

As Michael padded down the hallway in his housecoat, there was only

one light that he could see. It came from the kitchen.

Their cabin was by no means a simple shack in the woods. It was roomy and beautifully finished with polished hardwood floors and walls. Ray always figured it had been built as a private get-away by some rich doctor from West Vancouver. There was no questioning the privacy of the place. You had to drive almost 50 kilometers along an old logging road to reach the nearest highway.

The kitchen was, like the rest of the cabin, tastefully furnished. It had all the modern conveniences, but it was a stylized country kitchen with brass pots and pots hanging from the ceiling and a large counter island in the middle of the room. An antique table and chairs sat in a large bay window that served as a breakfast nook.

When Michael walked in, Ray was in the nook, standing there in his T-shirt and underwear. He had a beer in his hand as he stared through the window, the rain streaming down the outside of the pane.

"What's up? Couldn't sleep?"

Ray just grunted, barely even turning around to acknowledge Michael's presence. After grabbing himself a beer from the fridge, Michael walked over and sat at the table.

"You look really pale. Are you feeling okay? You're not sick, are you?"

"It's nothing," said Ray.

Michael took a sip of his beer. "You know, today, that wasn't your fault. I mean, it wasn't you. Actually, I think I got you pretty good too."

Ray turned around. There was a red welt on one side of his face. On the other side there was a definite purple bruise swelling up. Ray touched it gingerly with his fingers and flashed a grin. "I guess you're right there." The grin quickly vanished. "I was just so worried. I could've killed you. I just don't want to hurt you, Cathy—" Ray closed his eyes and grimaced. "Shit. I'm sorry, Michael."

"That's okay. I don't mind."

"I do, though." Ray turned away, looking out the window again. "This whole thing is ridiculous. If I thought for one minute that you could survive on your own, I'd be gone."

"Look, this is some weird shit we're living through. We're both scared—"

"You're the one that's scared, Michael. You prissy little..."

"Go on, say it. Tell me what I am."

Ray flinched, screwing up his face. But he didn't turn around. He took another swig from his beer bottle and continued to stare outside.

"Anyway, I'm not so sure that dying is the worst thing that could happen," said Michael.

"I know. It's what comes afterwards, right?"

"That's what I'm talking about. It doesn't frighten me as much anymore."

"You're not afraid of eternal damnation? A good Catholic boy like you?"

You prick, Ray. Once you find the right button you just keep on pushing it.

"He made me what I am," said Michael. "I was always so afraid—afraid

of how I'd be judged. But now I think it's all right. It's okay with Him."

Ray turned around. "You're talking to Jesus now?"

"Well, sort of." Michael sighed as Ray scowled at him. "Just a minute, Ray, listen to me. It's to do with the storm." Michael hesitated for a second, then continued. "You know that phase you go through, when you're no longer completely under, but you're not quite yourself yet?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Well, have you noticed a change there lately?"

"Well," said Ray, still scowling, "it's getting longer."

"Yeah, but it *feels* different too. It's not scary. It's better. It's actually... comforting."

"Comforting? Shit, I wouldn't quite call it that."

"No? But aren't the things you see different? I mean different from when you're under?"

"Yeah, I guess." Ray turned to stare out the window again.

"I think the storm's losing its power," continued Michael. "When I'm in that zone, that transition zone, I feel it. I feel I can beat this thing. I—"

"Oh, for crying out loud! It's just part of the psychosis."

"Well, okay. But they couldn't have intended that. Why would the storm have a positive effect on you? What would be their point?"

"No, Michael, I'm sure they never intended it. We know they don't have control over the storm anymore. It's got to be some fanatics experimenting with psychological warfare."

"Like Iraq?"

"Yeah." Ray gave a short laugh. "The mother of all storms."

"Anyway, I feel... a strength, a spiritual strength."

"Oh, this is great!" sneered Ray. "I'm trying my damndest to save us out here, and you're being visited by God Almighty." Ray turned and roughly brushed past Michael as he stepped into the main part of the kitchen.

"So you're just going to laugh?" asked Michael as Ray walked over towards the kitchen sink. "Tell me how fucked up I am?"

Ray said nothing as he threw his empty bottle into the cabinet under the sink.

"I know you're hurting, Ray. Why don't you ever let me in? Do you want to talk about them? Cathy and your little girl?"

"No, I don't!" growled Ray. He had his head buried in the fridge, looking for another beer.

"Fine, be that way. You so stubborn. You're just like my dad."

"What's wrong with being stubborn?" Ray was leaning back against the fridge, sipping on a fresh beer.

"Did I ever tell you about my dad? Good old Dad. You wanna hear stubborn? We took a trip once. We'd been driving all day, Mom and Dad in the front, me and my brother in the back. We finally arrived at some town on the Oregon coast. It was pissing down, dark. We were dying to go, we'd

been holding it for hours, 'cause Dad of course wouldn't stop for something like that. Well, he had the name and address of the place we were supposed to stay, but he didn't know that town, he didn't know where that street was. 'Stop and ask someone,' Mom kept saying. 'Go to a gas station.' But not my dad. No. We just drove around and around for hours. Hours." Michael shook his head. "I think I ended up peeing in my pants."

"That's *it*? For God's sake, Michael, all men do that. It's just a guy thing. That's all. Your dad was just a *guy*."

"He wasn't *just* a guy! Okay?" Michael's cheeks were flushed in anger.

Ray shrugged. "Yeah? Well, at least you *knew* your old man."

The two men sipped their beers in silence for a few minutes.

"What was it like being an altar boy?" said Ray finally. He didn't look up.

"What do you mean?"

"The priests, what were they like? I mean, I've heard about them. Did they try anything with you?"

"You're sick, Ray. No, of course not. They're not all like that. They were good men..." Michael paused for a moment. He tried to look Ray in the face but Ray kept looking down at his beer bottle. "Ray?"

"Hmm?"

"Did someone try something with you?"

Ray screwed up his face. At first Michael thought he wasn't going to answer, but after several seconds, Ray finally spoke. He spoke softly, almost mumbling.

"He was my gym teacher. I liked him, I trusted him. I didn't want to...you know. I'd never done it. Well, not with a grown man. I was scared. I told him I was scared. But he wouldn't stop—he was so strong." Ray's lower lip began to quiver. "How could he do that? I trusted him."

"I'm so sorry, Ray."

Ray looked up. His eyes were bloodshot. "Yeah, well, life goes on."

"Is that when you decided?" asked Michael.

"Decided what?"

"That you were straight?"

Ray glowered at Michael before answering "Fuck this. I'm going back to bed."

Ray stomped off. He stopped before going through the door. "Um, I'm...er...going into town tomorrow. Save me the usual hysterics, will ya? You'll be okay. Just keep your rifle handy. It'll only be a few days. Let's not have the same old song and dance."

"Go, Ray, that's fine," said Michael. "Just be careful. You know city people."

"What's left of them."

"Whatever. If the storm blows through again while you're there..."

"I know. Tell me about it."

"Oh, and Ray," said Michael, pushing his chair back and turning around.

"Get us stuff we need, okay? We don't need another generator and you've got plenty of hunting shit."

"We have to survive out here, you know."

"Yeah, but we don't have to live on canned food and squirrel meat. Get some more seeds. And are you ever going to bring that topsoil and fertilizer I keep asking for?"

Ray snorted. "What are trying to do here, anyway. Build a life or something? Shit..."

Ray slammed the door behind him.

"WHAT IS THIS?"

Ray was busy piling more pelts into the back of the Suburban. The cargo area was already almost filled with them—mostly rabbit, but there was also weasel, beaver and fox.

"I need them to barter with. That's how it works, Mike. I give 'em what they want, they give me what I want in return."

"I told you—don't ever call me 'Mike.' That's what my dad called me."

"Sorry. It just slipped."

"But I mean, whadda ya think this is? Trapper Jacques returning to the fort? People don't want furs."

"They need to keep warm."

"Shit, Ray. There's enough clothes out there to last us all a thousand years. It's *food* that they want. Take some meat, for God's sake."

"We *need* that food," hissed Ray. "You understand? That's *our* food."

"We've got a whole fuckin' basement full. Wall to wall freezers, full of meat. We don't need it all. Besides, I can grow food." Michael waved his hand in the direction of the garden.

The cabin was built on the side of a gently rising slope. Below the cabin and the driveway was an area of several hundred square meters that had been cleared of trees. There was a tool shed out there and the chicken coop. There were also some boats and vehicles scattered around. But most of the area was set aside as garden. Michael had spent two years painstakingly cultivating the soil and planting row upon row of vegetables.

"Yeah, whatever." Ray slammed the hatch door shut. He roughly pushed Michael aside as he headed to the driver's door.

"Ray," said Michael, grabbing Ray's arm before he could step into the truck. "I don't think Vancouver is safe anymore. The storms there are bad enough. But now it could be hot."

"Hot? Why would it be? It was never bombed."

"I know *that*, for crying out loud. But that doesn't mean something hot couldn't be brought in from somewhere else. Somewhere that *was* struck. And anyway, just because nothing's dropped yet doesn't mean it couldn't happen."

"Michael," Ray shook his arm free and hopped onto the driver's seat, "there's no one left to do that, okay?"

The truck started up. The diesel engine rattled noisily. Ray swore a few times as he ground the gears looking for reverse. He rolled the window down.

"You sure you're gonna be okay by yourself?"

"Of course. I'm fine."

"Okay then."

The truck backed up over one of Michael's flowerbeds, then turned and sped off down the driveway, spinning its wheels here and there in the mud as it went.

THE WORMS WERE ALL AROUND HIS FEET. THEIR SLIMY GREEN BODIES WERE puffy and bloated. There were hundreds of them—no, more like thousands. In every direction the ground around him was a living carpet of quivering green flesh.

"Argh! Die, you fuckers!" he screamed as he dropped to his knees. The worms squelched sickeningly beneath him. In a frenzy, he stabbed at the ground with the large knife he held in his hand.

What's that?

He felt something—something inside. There was a worm inside him! It must have crawled up his leg and burrowed into his body. Now it was writhing in his brain behind his right eye.

"Ah, shit!"

He brought up the knife with both hands, the blade towards his face. He had to dig out his eye. He had to remove that part of his brain where the invading worm was squirming. Then—

The worms were gone. He had an awareness of where he was. He was in the safety of that place—the transition phase. A wind was howling, whipping past him from behind as he knelt in the middle of the vegetable garden. Just a few meters ahead of him stood Jesus Christ. A light was emanating from Him as He stood there on the path between the rows of beans and the potato patch.

Michael was vaguely aware that moisture from the soft ground was starting to seep through the knees of his jeans. He rose unsteadily to his feet. As he did so, he reached his hand out towards Jesus.

Jesus smiled. It was that same reassuring smile that He had given Michael the first time He appeared.

But then the light started to fade, and as it faded the vision of Jesus began to shrink and recede. Beyond the light, another five meters or so, there was a spinning, churning black mass. It was the black storm. But it was diminishing, collapsing in on itself. Like a living thing, the black tendrils writhed angrily as if fighting off its demise. It quickly swallowed up the light containing the vision of Jesus. As if it was being sucked into a small hole suspended in the air, the black mass continued to spin and shrink.

Around Michael, the zucchini and squash plants were hacked to shreds by the long scissors that he used for gardening. He suddenly realized that

he still held the scissors in his hand—the same scissors that he had almost used to pierce his eye and cut into his brain.

“SO YOU SHOT IT?”

“Yeah, well the stupid thing was digging a hole under the chicken fence. The hell if I’m going to let some fox kill all of our chickens.” Michael took another sip of the excellent brandy that Ray had brought back with him. It was nice sitting on the couch together like this, getting a warm glow on. Almost like old times.

“But I can’t believe that you... You normally wait for me to do that kind of thing.”

“I know. But it was really buggin’ me. And the rifle was sitting there by the front door. So finally I just said ‘What the hell.’ I even skinned it for you. Another pelt for your collection. Hey, not bad for a prissy little fag, eh?”

“Look, I’m sorry about that. You aren’t prissy, Michael.”

“No? Well, you aren’t such an asshole either.”

“You called me an asshole?” asked Ray, raising his eyebrows.

“At least a thousand times,” said Michael smirking.

“I guess I’m not the easiest person to live with. It’s just...these are such scary times. I’m so concerned about our safety. I find it hard to deal with... You know, other things get pushed aside...”

“I know. I know. But we’ve seen the worst of it. Like I said, the storm’s losing its potency. Even now I feel I can keep control when I’m under. You know? Even though I’m seriously tripping, it’s more me and less of...of...”

“Less of those strange creatures we become,” muttered Ray.

“Yeah.”

“You know,” continued Ray, “I don’t think they fully realized what they’d created. At least, not at first. The black storm isn’t just a medium of transmission. It actually has physical mass.”

“I know. And when it comes into contact with humans it doesn’t just induce this psychosis—it actually *feeds* off us. It absorbs energy from us. Like our psychic energy. Our fear and hate.”

“Well, I dunno about that,” said Ray. “But it certainly grew—it physically grew. That’s how it got out of control. It’s no longer a weapon under their control. It’s grown. It got caught up in the weather—became part of it.”

“And it got blown to every corner of the globe,” said Michael. He took a swig of the brandy and grimaced. “But now it’s dying. I think that was inevitable. Most of the human race is gone. So now it’s lost its means of obtaining energy. We were its food.”

“Hmm,” said Ray, rolling his brandy glass in his hands, “I’m not sure. I’m thinking the problem is at the source.”

“You mean back in Baghdad or wherever?”

“Yes. There may be no power from the source because the source is gone. Think about it. When the storm first hits and all hell breaks loose in London

or Washington, what's one of the first places you'd think of to hit?"

"Baghdad! Man, I never thought of that."

"Yeah," said Ray, "and I'll bet they never thought of that either. They just didn't know what they were playing with."

"But you know what I'm talking about now, Ray? You feel that sense that you're gaining control?"

Ray nodded.

"Then why do you say it's not comforting? Doesn't Jesus—"

"It's not Jesus."

"But, then..." It suddenly dawned on Michael. "Oh, Ray." He put his hand on Ray's shoulder. "Ray. It's Cathy."

Ray sighed. He stared down at the drink he was swirling in his hand.

"That must be hard," said Michael. "To see her after...what happened to her."

Ray was silent.

"Did she ever know?" asked Michael. "I mean, about that teacher?"

"Are you kidding? No way." Ray shook his head. "No. I even had myself convinced that I was a real man. That is until..." Ray took a sip of his brandy. "I never actually told you, did I?"

"I can guess. We've all seen it."

"You know when you're under, how it's someone else? Like it's not you. But you remember it."

"Hmm."

"I was going through the jungle. These gigantic...bugs flew at me. I mean, they were monstrous. The big one was buzzing around my head, snapping at me with these fangs. The small one was biting my leg, stinging me. I managed to kick and throw them off. Then I slashed at them with my machete. It was satisfying. I can still remember...enjoying it."

Ray took a gulp of brandy, finishing the glass.

"When it was over," —Ray's voice was shaky now— "I was in our kitchen. I was holding a carving knife, all covered in blood. And they were...they... Oh God! Oh God, Michael! I killed them. I killed my own wife and daughter!"

He collapsed into Michael's arms, wailing in anguish. Michael gently rocked him back and forth. After a while, the wailing became sobs. Huge, gulping sobs that shook Ray's entire body.

Michael held him like that until Ray finally fell asleep.

AS MICHAEL HEADED BACK FROM THE CHICKEN COOP, HIS FEET SANK into the sodden, moss-covered ground at the edge of the vegetable patch. He picked his way carefully, not wanting to drop the six brown eggs that he carried in an old ice cream bucket.

The rain earlier on had left the morning gray, cold, and damp. The clouds formed a heavy blanket above.

Just before Michael reached the bottom of the steps leading up to the front

porch, the front door flew open and Ray came rushing out. The porch was a generous one, running the entire length of the large cabin. Ray stopped halfway between the door and the top of the steps. The blanket that Michael had placed over him the night before was wrapped around his shoulders. He had a wild-eyed look as he peered over to where the vehicles were parked. He let out a sigh and slumped beneath his blanket as he noticed Michael walking up the steps.

"Oh, there you are."

"Yeah, I was just getting us some breakfast." Michael found it difficult to keep a smirk of his face. "What's up? You thought I was going somewhere?"

"Well... I..." stammered Ray, glancing around, avoiding eye contact with Michael. "After all that's happened, I just thought you might... I mean, shit, I wouldn't blame you."

"Well, you are a jerk, Ray," said Michael, reaching the top of the steps. He was smiling broadly now. "But come on, are you kidding? We're getting through this together. You and me."

"You think we really can?"

"Hell, yes. You just gotta believe in yourself."

Ray nodded, pulling the blanket tighter around himself. His hair was disheveled and his face was still creased and puffy from sleep.

Ray finally looked over at Michael, giving him a shaky, uncertain smile. "You know, I think Cathy came to me to tell me she forgives me."

"No, Ray. She's telling you to forgive *yourself*. It wasn't your fault."

A gust of cold wind blew past Michael. He shivered from the sudden chill.

"Oh no. Don't tell me," muttered Ray as he walked over to the railing of the porch.

Michael placed the ice cream bucket at the top of the steps, then walked over to stand next to Ray. Michael's mackinaw started to flap in the wind, which was now really starting to whip up, making the trees sway. In the far left corner of the clearing, the dark, ragged edges of the black storm were descending down from the cloud cover and were starting to flow over the tops of the trees.

Ray turned and looked Michael in the eye. "Michael, we—"

Michael grabbed Ray's shoulder and squeezed it tightly.

"It's okay, Ray," Michael gave him a reassuring smile. "We'll be okay." ❁

Two Certainties

E. L. Chen

THERE ARE TWO CERTAINTIES IN LIFE, WHETHER A peasant, merchant, scholar or lord, Mai thought wryly. Death, and taxes.

Perhaps that was why the villagers shrank back from Mai's cart as if she were the White Tiger himself. Death, however, could have never caused this much fear and panic. As the royal tax collector's entourage ambled through the tiny fishing village, spattering yellow mud in its wake, everybody clambered out of Mai's path. Men reined in their horses, mischievous boys snatched back their stones at mid-throw, and mothers wrapped protective arms around their little ones and whisked them away from the approaching menace. *Death and taxes.*

Only the King was exempt from these inevitabilities. The earthbound son of the Dragon God could never die: his spirit would live on in his heir. And the thought of Yuen taking a third of his income for himself was paradoxical. Mai's age-lined mouth quirked at the corners. Not even the King's treasurer, an ascetic who revered numbers more than his own ancestors, could have solved that conundrum.

Mai couldn't help but smile when a grubby-faced little girl stared up at her, too frozen with terror to move. No doubt that the child's mother had told her that if she misbehaved, Weng Mai-lin would take her as part of the King's third. Mai was supposed to be his Majesty's representative, but

naturally the people would rather stone the messenger than read the message. It didn't help that Mai was easier to loathe than the generous King; as his grandfather's second wife, she was older than the Shuwao River and crankier than a rusty compass. She may have had a thousand burly men to guard her bounty, but it was Weng Mai-lin who demanded the King's third, not her soldiers.

Suddenly the soldiers at the front halted. A harried-looking fishwife dragged the little girl away, alternately apologizing to the guards and scolding her daughter. But it was not the girl who had stopped their march. A crowd had gathered in the narrow road, the buzz of curiosity overcoming that of fear.

Mai peered over the heads of her men, wondering what had caused the disturbance. She could see nothing, but heard the sound of a galloping horse, its hoofbeats quickened with panic. The villagers who had shied away from Mai and her entourage drew closer to receive the visitor.

The horse broke through the crowd and skidded to a halt. It had indeed galloped in panic; its hide and mouth were foamy from the strain. Its rider, however, elicited the strongest cries of shock from the villagers. The youth was draped limply over the saddle, an arrow shaft embedded in his shoulder.

There was a shriek as a woman recognized him. "My son," she wailed. "He and his friends went to the sea to catch crayfish." Several other women began sobbing as they realized that their own children had not returned.

The boy lifted his head. "*Gilau*," he gasped. "Ten thousand, maybe more."

Mai shivered, certain that the White Tiger's glowing gaze was on her back. The *gilau* were warriors from across the sea, a tribe of sweaty giants who had chrysanthemum-colored hair, pale eyes, and skin as pink as cooked shrimp. King Yuen had once told her that they hailed from a strange land in which sons defied their fathers and the elderly were scorned, not revered. A farm village, an old woman, and her small army were no match for these seasoned fighters.

The captain of her guards closed the dead youth's eyes, then snapped to action. "Gather up as many things as you can—food, clothing, water, anything you do not want touched by *gilau* hands. The mountains to the southwest will be sufficient protection until his Majesty's troops arrive. Most importantly, make sure that you hide your tracks. The *gilau* will not rest otherwise, if they know you are ripe for pillage."

Upon his last words, the villagers fled to their homes to pack for the exodus. Captain Shen turned to Mai. "Take the cart and one of the horses and hide with the villagers," he said. "Pui will take the other and send word to his Majesty. The rest of us will defend the coast as best as we can."

Death's amber gaze was certainly on them all. "Captain," she said, "the boy said there are at least ten thousand *gilau*. You are only one-tenth their size, and unprepared for full-scale warfare."

"Revered grandmother," he said graciously but firmly, "we each have our duties. You collect the King's third; we protect his Majesty's interests." His

men nodded gravely in agreement. Mai could almost see the White Tiger's shadow lurking behind them.

There was nothing she could say that would persuade Shen that engaging the *gilau* was futile. He would only dismiss her words as those of an ornery old woman.

"You are very brave, Captain," she finally said. Her resigned voice betrayed that although she respected his decision, she didn't have much faith in it. They were to have completed their rounds by the end of summer. It seemed that for once, however, death would come first.

Unless Mai could find a way to collect what was owed to his Majesty.

SOMETIMES THE WHITE TIGER STALKED HIS PREY WITH INFINITE PATIENCE; sometimes he attacked without warning. Occasionally he liked to play with his quarry before devouring it. Mai wondered which approach he would take with her. *Hopefully the latter*, she thought as she waited for the opium to flood her senses.

She'd always carried a small supply of the drug. All the women of the nobility did; it was a sign of the family's wealth that they could afford to indulge their sons' wives. Mai had seen opium steal too many lives and souls, and thus only used it to dull the pain of her aging joints.

Tonight, however, she had another motive. Her lacquer and mother-of-pearl jewel box lay open by her head, a faint white dust the only evidence of its former contents. The slender glass pipe had dropped from her languorous hand long ago.

A euphoric haze soon settled upon the tent's interior like a cloud of sandalwood incense. The air seemed alive, thick, churning, heavy, weighing down on her reclining body and filling her lungs. Her senses were heightened a hundredfold; cascading dust motes tickled the bare skin of her hands, and the smell of the pork dumplings and chrysanthemum tea she'd consumed the previous day pervaded her hair. She slid her fingertips down the front of her brocade jacket, laughing silently with wonder as she traced each embroidered scale of the dragons twined at her breast.

As Mai drifted in opium-induced delirium, she almost regretted not having indulged in the drug during her youth. After her husband had taken a third wife, she'd been banished to the exile of the women's quarters. Forty-odd years was a long time to endure, but the boredom had been worth it. When Yuen was born, as his grandfather's only surviving widow, Mai had gained the respectful title of Second Grandmother. Her fellow wives had succumbed to opium, illicit adultery, or ill-fated rivalry. The consequences of these vices, of course, was death.

Death and taxes. Captain Shen would have been startled to hear the girlish giggle that burst from Mai's lips.

The memory of her wasted youth began to fade, leaving only the present and future as well as the heaviness that pressed against her chest. The lethargic bliss dissipated and resolve took its place. *We each have our duties,*

Shen had told her. A poor excuse for a suicide mission that would buy the kingdom a few days at most. Ornerly old woman or not, Mai could not let the captain and his men die in vain. She had responsibilities too.

When the young man appeared, Mai nearly mistook him for another phantasm from her past. He was tall and slim, his hair as long and white as a waterfall and his skin paler than sun-blached rice. He wore a jacket and flowing trousers much like her own, except they were of the finest moon-white silk. His sharp, almond-shaped eyes were the color of rich amber.

A tiger's eyes.

"Weng Mai-lin," he said in a curiously hollow and accented voice.

Mai feebly nodded her head in greeting. "I thank you for coming, pale one."

The White Tiger raised snowy eyebrows. "Few welcome the advent of death."

Sometimes he likes to play with his quarry before devouring it. Mai propped herself onto her elbows. "Because it is inevitable," she said, chuckling. "But I willingly chose to call you here."

"Oh?" If he had really been a tiger, he would have been purring.

Sometimes he likes to play with his quarry. Mai smiled steadily, trying not to show weakness in front of so powerful a predator. "The Dragon God is your great-uncle, is He not?"

"Yes."

"His sister's son married a mortal woman, who drowned in the Shuwao River shortly afterward."

"You know the tale, I see."

"Every child knows how you were born from her cold body," she said. "With your first breath, the waters of the Shuwao gushed forth from your lungs and flooded the kingdom."

The White Tiger bowed his pale head with deadly grace. He'd caught the scent of the bait, ignorant of the snare she'd laid out. She had to be cautious. At the slightest hint that *he* was the quarry, the predator would react furiously.

"You are therefore of this land," Mai said.

He bowed again. "Like all men of this kingdom, I serve his Majesty with my special skills."

"Tell me then, White Tiger—when was the last time you paid the King's third?"

His amber eyes widened briefly, and then he began to laugh. Although the sound was quiet, it sent chills across Mai's numb skin. "Foolish old woman," he said. "You summon me with your life, only to discuss taxes?"

Mai glared at him as if she were reprimanding a small child. "Show respect for your elders," she snapped. "I am Second Grandmother to the King, and his Majesty is the Dragon's immortal son, whereas you are only His half-mortal grandnephew."

The White Tiger jerked in shock. Mai hoped that she had sufficiently

chastened him. "The law declares that only the King does not pay taxes," she said. "So I believe you have a very heavy debt on your hands, young nephew."

He regarded her for a long time with his calculating amber gaze. Mai silently prayed to the Dragon that she had not gone too far. She had trapped the White Tiger into a corner; would he fight, or yield to her will? To her knowledge, he had never let anyone tame him.

"I should have known better than to tangle with a tax collector," he finally said. His wry smile revealed a set of sharp, white teeth. "What do you want, revered grandmother?"

"As of tomorrow, I want the King's third," she said, a triumphant grin stretching across her age-lined face. "With twenty percent interest."

CAPTAIN SHEN WEARILY WIPED THE BLOOD AND SWEAT FROM HIS forehead and continued to inspect the remains of his army. The *gilau* were not as skilled or graceful as his men, but they more than made up for it in brute force. Still, they'd managed to put an arrow in the elephant's flank; before the sun had set the previous night, the warriors' leader had barked in their clumsy tongue and they had retreated for the day.

This minor victory, however, had cost Shen almost half of his men. Roughly five hundred soldiers had woken this morning, but most were nursing wounds. Shen explained the day's tactics as they waited for dawn. It wasn't much of a strategy; they were only buying time with their lives. Every man knew that the White Tiger's approach was imminent. Shen could only pray to the Dragon that Pui would reach the King in time.

The sun rose with a painful slowness over the horizon, illuminating his Majesty's poppy-red banner. The intertwined gold dragons, one representing the King, the other representing his divine father, danced as the silk rippled in the breeze. Shen took a deep breath, preparing to galvanize his men with a shout—and suddenly froze, the King's name caught in his throat.

He blinked once, twice, then rubbed his eyes with a grimy hand. But the vision persisted.

There were twice as many soldiers than he'd had a second ago.

Shen forgot to breathe as he recognized the men he'd lost the day before. There was skinny, big-eared Zhou, who had fallen to a *gilau* sword. Broad-shouldered Huan, who had taken an arrow in the chest after he'd successfully defeated ten of the enemy. Young Jiu, who had died peacefully of his wounds during the night. About two hundred of his fallen comrades stared soullessly at him as if they were anticipating his orders, heedless of their lethal injuries.

The living soldiers noticed their captain's hesitation and followed his startled gaze. Many gasped in surprise, claiming it was a miracle; others made the sign of the Dragon to ward off evil.

Then they realized that they were truly not alone. Standing head and shoulders above the men were about three hundred *gilau*, pale eyes and

broad pink faces also staring expectantly at Shen. A young soldier cried out and ran his blade through the nearest interloper. The warrior did not even blink. His shocked attacker pulled out the sword and let out an oath when he discovered it was unstained.

Shen silenced the gasps and prayers with a wave of his hand. It appeared that the White Tiger had tired of his prey, and *someone* had to remain calm in the face of such a phenomenon. Besides, they were already a doomed army of living dead.

Another five hundred made no difference to him.

In the ghostly quiet he could hear the faint rumble of the approaching enemy. "For his Majesty, the Son of the Dragon!" he shouted.

The men, dead or living, native or *gilau*, brandished their weapons and cheered with one voice.

THE NEWCOMERS WERE TIRELESS, FEARLESS, AND INDESTRUCTIBLE. Because of these traits, only eighty of the living were taken by the White Tiger. Thirty-two, however, were given back to Shen the following morning, along with eight hundred of the two thousand *gilau* they'd killed that day.

"I do not understand," Shen's lieutenant said as they awaited another dawn. "Why would the White Tiger return these foreigners as well?"

"A predator does not care how many hooves or wings his quarry has," Shen said. "He simply knows it has entered his hunting grounds."

His lieutenant seemed satisfied by his explanation, although in all honesty, Shen could not claim to know the White Tiger's mind. But it was as good an answer as any. It was the only answer he could give and the only one he could understand.

As the rising sun lit up the battlefield, Shen noted with an eerie calm that the yellow banks were stained red. It was only a matter of time before his own blood flowed through the mud, yet another tributary leading to the sea. Then he too would fight until the White Tiger took back the dead.

"For the King!" he cried hoarsely.

EVENUALLY FEWER OF SHEN'S LIVING SOLDIERS DIED, AND MORE *GILAU* defected to their side once the White Tiger had seized them. At first the remaining warriors fought fiercely, intent on destroying what they saw as sorcery. Nevertheless, after facing their dead comrades, terror and uncertainty spread through their ranks like pestilence.

On the fifth morning, the *gilau* could take no more. Their retreat was hasty as they realized that the dead far outnumbered the living. A single cheer arose from the throats of Shen's men, and then it was abruptly silenced. The living watched in amazement as the dead collapsed to the ground, the White Tiger's prey once more.

Their victory was anticlimactic; the sea of fallen bodies reminded them that the dead had to be honored. The survivors began to search for the

corpses of their friends. Shen tiredly sheathed his sword. Once his men had been separated from the *gilau*, he would see that the warriors were given proper rites. They had battled bravely, no matter whose side they'd fought on.

As he surveyed the carnage, the sunlight glinted off of a pale, slim figure that did not belong to any of the soldiers.

The man's long white hair betrayed his age, and yet he bent over the bodies without a cane or crutches.

The man turned around, and Shen found himself pinned by a pair of eyes that were a deeper amber than the sea's bloodstained banks. Although Shen had stared death in the face many times during the battle, it had never been as formidable as the White Tiger's intense gaze.

"The debt has been paid," the White Tiger said, revealing sharp white teeth.

THEY FOUND WENG MAI-LIN, ROYAL TAX COLLECTOR AND SECOND Grandmother to the King, lying in her tent with a pleased smile on her face, lost forever to a last opium dream.

Yuen picked up the empty lacquer and mother-of-pearl jewel box. "A tragedy," the King said, shaking his head sadly. "Though I'm surprised she let the White Tiger take her without a struggle. She was a ferocious woman."

Captain Shen shrugged his shoulders but respectfully drew a white silk sheet over the woman's body. "She was old, your Majesty.

"It was inevitable." ♣

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CRUNCH. CRUNCHCRUNCH.

Corey pulled the covers over his head, but he could still hear teeth reaching bone through tough skin and flesh.

Hang in there.

Crunchcrunch. Crunch.

Can't go on forever.

Silence.

Corey held his breath.

Silence.

Corey let out his breath, shoved down the covers.

U-u-u-r-r-r-p.

"JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH," SAID LIJE, LIFTING THE LID OF THE garbage can to dump the breakfast coffee grounds. "What's *that*?"

"The Duke caught a rat last night," said Corey. "Ate it."

"Next time, digest it, pilgrim," Lije told the Duke, slipping the big black and white cat a piece of bacon anyway.

"You didn't have to clean it up," said Corey.

"Sorry about that, kid."

Corey shrugged, swiped at the last bit of egg yolk with his last bit of toast, and scraped back his chair—the cheap linoleum couldn't disguise the uneven concrete underneath—and carried his breakfast dishes to the sink. "I'll do 'em. You better get going."

"Look kid," said Lije. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," said Corey. He turned off the water and inspected Lije's face

critically. "Black eye's almost gone." He shoved Lije toward the steps leading up to the front of the house. "I'll be all right."

"I'll let you know where I am and when I'll be home." Lije opened the door, then hesitated, first sun picking out the tattooed panther springing from his forearm toward the hand that held the knob. "Uh, better stick close to the house. It's kind of a rough neighborhood."

"I'll be okay."

DAYTIME TV LOOKED PRETTY DEADLY. HADN'T BROUGHT ALONG HIS roller blades; just as well, didn't want to get mugged for 'em. Although he'd left them behind mostly because he didn't want to hurt Lije's feelings. He'd refused the loan of Mike's laptop for the same reason.

Mike had said Corey should go to Grandma and Grandpa's. "I mean, for heaven's sake, someone who offers to buy beer for a minor..."

"Corey's responsible enough for both of them, even if he is just eleven," Mom had answered.

The Duke stood hopefully at the back door. "Want out, fella?" Corey asked.

Light flooded the dingy steps as he opened the door.

Light and—

"She-eesh!"

A rose bush bloomed bravely where the side fence met the dilapidated shed at the back of the yard, but the scent of the roses was lost in the foulness ascending with the heat.

The back yard was smothered under garbage. Split bags spilled potato peelings and broccoli ends, bones and fast food cartons, cans, bottles, things Corey didn't want to know about.

"And you only caught *one* rat?"

The Duke gave Corey a dirty look and dove behind a pile of cardboard. *Well, I wanted something to do.*

He found a box of garbage bags under the sink and began to fill them with recyclables, keeping bottles and cans separate.

"Mort ain't gonna like that."

Corey started and looked up. Gross, he thought, but didn't say it; Mom had taught him *some* manners.

But the woman on the outside stairs leading to the top floor apartment really was gross. He'd bet that if it weren't for the garbage, he'd be able to smell *her*. Her greasy hair was almost the same non-color as the T-shirt and knit pants straining across pendulous stomach and lumpy thighs. Her small black eyes were buried in fat; bags of fat hung from her arms. Two equally colorless children of indeterminate sex and age clung to her pants; two more hung over the rail.

"Uh... I'm just... If it was cleaned up," with sudden inspiration, "think how nice it would be for the kids..." His voice trailed away under those nasty black eyes.

"Mort don't want it cleaned up."

"But why—"

Something squealed near the shed. The Duke trotted up, a young rat struggling in his jaws.

The children shrieked and ran up the stairs so precipitously that one slipped, grabbed the rail just in time, and scrambled out of sight through the door above.

"See," Corey said, "There's—"

But the woman was gone too.

He whipped around at a mocking, musical trill.

The young woman on the first-floor back stoop certainly didn't lack color. Her spiky red hair shaded into purple, and her short dress of yellow, red, and orange patches almost glowed. She was so tall and skinny that in jeans she might have been mistaken for a boy—at first glance, anyway.

She laughed and lowered her clarinet before Corey could identify the tune she'd been playing.

"You just move in?" she asked.

"Lije did."

"That new guy in the basement? He your brother?"

"My dad. I'm staying with him while Mom and Mike are on their honeymoon."

"You sure don't have much in the way of father figures, do you?"

"Huh?"

"'Lije'? 'Mike'? Whatever happened to 'Dad'? 'Father'? 'Step-dad'?"

"That's none of your business." If she could be rude, so could he.

"I'm fixing lunch," she said, without apologizing. "Want some?"

"No, thank you." Corey turned back to dropping cans into the garbage bag. When he looked again, the young woman was gone, but he could hear her clarinet through the open door, raggy and dancy...

His foot was actually on the stoop.

He shrugged angrily, retreated down the steps and returned to picking up cans.

When he had one bag full of cans and another of jars, he carried in some restaurant-size pickle jars he'd set aside, scrubbed them and set them to drain, and made himself a sandwich. Should ask Lije about garbage days... Corey shook his head, checked the blue pages, punched in the number, punched in subsequent numbers, and noted down the recorded garbage collection dates.

The phone rang almost as soon as he hung up.

"Hi, kid. Got three days' work down at the harbor, cleaning out a grain ship. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay, don't worry. Uh, when's garbage day?"

"Gee, kid, I dunno..."

Feeling a little mean, Corey returned to the back yard.

Someone had dumped the cans and bottles he'd collected.

Jaw set, he began to pick them up again.

COREY UNPACKED THE GROCERY BAGS WHILE LIJE SHOWERED OFF sweat and grain dust.

There was a barbecued chicken with fries and coleslaw, a carton of vanilla ice cream, three packages of frozen pie crust and one can each of apple, blueberry, and cherry pie filling.

"Pie for breakfast," Lije said as he returned to the kitchen, toweling his hair. "Just like Grandma used to make. Don't tell your mom. So what'd you do all day?"

Corey waved a hand toward the clean jars in a sparkling row, filled with macaroni, sugar, coffee and dry cat food. "Figured if the Duke was catching rats..."

"Your mother did the same thing," said Lije. "Our first apartment, only there it was cockroaches. Guess you don't have to worry about that with this new guy, eh? You like him?"

"Mike's okay."

The roller blades had been a birthday present from Mike. "Where'd you get the jars?"

"Did you check out the back yard when you moved in?"

"Didn't have time. Look, kid... I know I should have told your mother about... You could have been staying with Grandma and Grandpa. But..."

"It's okay," said Corey. "I understand. You had to find some sort of work. What I was going to say was, no wonder the Duke's catching rats."

"Jesus Christ," said Lije when he saw the back yard.

"You shoulda seen it earlier," said Corey. "Recycling day's tomorrow. I called and asked."

"I'll take stuff to the curb," Lije said, hoisting one of the bags.

Lije returned as Corey was finishing the dishes. He wasn't alone.

"Meet our first-floor neighbor."

"I've met her," said Corey.

"But we weren't introduced," she said, holding out a hand that Corey didn't take. "Holly Pye. And you're Corey."

She was taller than Lije; her head nearly knocked against the light bulb in the low ceiling.

"Holly plays jazz clarinet in a club, nights, downtown," said Lije. "She's offered to look after you during the day."

"I can look after myself," said Corey.

"Have a beer?" Lije asked, reaching into the fridge.

"Don't mind if I do," said Corey.

"Not you. You get yours when..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, when I'm sixteen. Sixteen and eleven are both underage."

"By sixteen you'd be doing it anyway, so I might as well be there to make sure you do it right." Lije handed Corey a can of cola, which was what Corey

had really wanted anyway. "You don't worry about living alone in this neighborhood?" he went on to Holly. "That guy upstairs sounds dangerous."

Holly accepted the beer Lije uncapped. "I can handle him."

The conversation slid into music and musicians Corey had never heard of. He took his cola into the living room and fiddled with the antique TV until he found a channel that came in clearly.

But he knew when Holly left, even before Lije joined him.

"What's on?" said Lije, dropping onto the sofa next to Corey.

"*Stagecoach*," said Corey.

"Hey, one of my favorites. He rescued the baby yet?"

"He doesn't rescue the baby," said Corey. "You always get that wrong. You like her?"

"Holly? Jeez, just met her."

"I can take care of myself," said Corey.

"I know you can." Lije gnawed at a fingernail. "But if your mother ever found out I left you alone—"

"Who's gonna tell her? Anyway, I don't need *her*."

"Hey, kid, I could still send you to your grandma and grandpa's. Only I don't know what I'd tell 'em."

"Look," said Corey. "Here comes the part about the baby."

IN BED, COREY LISTENED FOR RATS BUT HEARD ONLY THE SOUND OF Holly's clarinet. He could almost remember the words...

The aroma of hot apple pie and coffee that woke him the next morning was underlaid by a scent of roses, so faint it faded even as he reached for his clothes.

COREY OPENED THE FRONT DOOR OF THE SHED; SOMETHING SCRABBLED under the back door. The Duke streaked after it. When Corey forced the back door open, there was nothing but anonymous back fences and heat-soaked, cracked pavement.

Besides rat droppings and cobwebs, the shed contained a broken rake, a rusty garden spade, and a battered metal garbage can. Another rat jumped out of the garbage can as Corey picked it up. He shrieked—*just like a girl*. The Duke pounced, and this time proudly dropped his prize at Corey's feet.

Corey dragged the can outside, put a bag into it and began to fill it with the least-deteriorated of the garbage. The horrible woman and her children watched from the steps.

So where's the fearsome Mort?

The Duke produced three more dead rats.

"Some cat!" Corey said admiringly, and lined them up artistically next to the newly-filled bags he'd stacked against the fence.

Where's Miss Holly-I'll-Look-After-You-Apple-Pye?

"You're up early," she said behind him.

"It's almost noon," said Corey, and turned away to insert a fresh bag into

the garbage can.

He was now uncovering maggots that writhed unpleasantly in the light before burrowing under the remaining rotted refuse. "After lunch I'm going out to put up flyers for my gig next week. Want to come along?"

The Duke dropped another rat at Corey's feet. It was still alive, its back broken. It scabbled with its front paws, its rear dragging helplessly. Corey watched, sickened. Holly squatted to watch the rat's struggles; then looked up, smiling, to the steps where the woman and children watched in grim silence.

Corey raised the spade, and, not daring to miss, brought it down on the rat's neck.

The rat shuddered and then lay still.

"Did you know that in medieval times people thought maggots were spontaneously generated from garbage?" Holly said.

"Okay," said Corey, determined not to let his voice shake. "I guess I could use a break."

HOLLY HAD A VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE, THE REAL THING.

The flyer taped to the top of the box on the front seat had a drawing of her in her patchwork dress, playing her clarinet while rats danced around her feet. On the flyer she spelled her name with an "E": "Holle" instead of "Holly."

"Yuck," said Corey. "Don't you get enough of those at home?"

"The friend who drew that thought it would be kind of cute, after what the guy wrote in the *Star*. See?" She pointed a long finger at one of the testimonials printed alongside the picture. "Would you and Lije like to come hear me this weekend?"

"It's at a bar, and I'm underage."

"I could make special arrangements."

Not me she's interested in. "You know what I heard Mom say about Lije?"

"Should I hear this?"

"She said he didn't need to get in touch with his inner child, he just needed to give it a good spanking."

Holly laughed.

"This is the third job he's been fired from for fighting."

Holly pulled into a parking lot and handed Corey a bundle of flyers and a stapler. "You take that side of the street, I'll take this side."

It was more fun than shoveling garbage and killing rats. He liked the thunk of the stapler nailing flyers to poles and hoardings, liked feeling a part of the whole exotic world of the posters and flyers that fluttered alongside Holly's.

"You can hand out what's left," Holly said when they met in front of a coffee house several blocks down.

She took her clarinet from its case and began to play. Corey shoved flyers at anyone who paused to listen, and there were a lot, all ages, even kids. A

lot of guys. *As if I cared.* Then he smiled.

"What's so funny?" Holly asked as she scooped up the coins that had been dropped in the case and packed away the clarinet.

"Oh, I was just remembering these old cartoons I used to watch on TV when I came home from school for lunch. *Betty Boop, Popeye, Mighty Mouse*. There's this *Mighty Mouse* one where the cat hypnotizes the lady mouse into singing, and then catches all the male mice that come to listen."

"'Oh don't you remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt,' " Holly sang.

"That's the one," Corey said, seduced into laughing aloud.

A GUY WHO LOOKED JUST LIKE BLUTO FROM THE *POPEYE* CARTOONS WAS ripping open the next to the last of the newly-filled bags.

"Hey!" Corey yelled as the contents were dumped onto the ground.

Bluto—or Mort, Corey supposed—reached for the last bag. On the stairs, the horrible woman and her horrible children squealed with laughter.

Corey grabbed at the bag.

Mort threw it to one side, pinned Corey's arms to his sides, and lifted him from the ground, baring sharp teeth in a Bluto-like grin. Corey had an instant, awful vision of his own body ripped apart as easily as one of the garbage bags, his insides shaken out and scattered across the yard.

A work boot connected with Mort's knee and a fist cut across Corey's vision, as if chased by the panther on the forearm behind it. Corey was let drop.

Mort was nearly twice as big as Lije, but Lije was faster. Mort staggered away and up the stairs. The woman and children had already vanished.

"From now on, keep your hands off the kid!" Lije called after him. "Are you all right?" he asked, turning to Corey.

"Yeah. Your eye's going black again."

Lije pulled a fresh garbage bag from the box and held it out to Corey. "You hold it open, I'll shovel."

They stacked the full bags in the shed, and Lije found a padlock for the door.

"Better the small rats getting at them than the big one," said Lije. He picked up the Duke's kill for the day—half-a-dozen by now—and bundled them in a garbage bag.

"Yuck!" said Corey, as Lije shoved the bag into the freezer. "What're you doing?"

"This is evidence," said Lije. "If the landlord won't do anything, we call the Board of Health."

"ALL RIGHT! PIZZA!" COREY CALLED AS HE EMERGED FROM THE SHOWER. Then he ducked back to cover himself with more than just a towel.

"I thought you should have something in return for all your help this afternoon," Holly smiled as Corey returned in clean jeans and T-shirt. "I hope it's got what you like on it."

Lije and Holly were still drinking beer and talking by the time Corey, unable to keep his eyes open any longer, stumbled away to the bedroom. Later he woke to the sound of Lije's voice, muted, on the other side of the thin wall, Holly's giggles, the creak of the sofa under moving bodies.

Corey, hot in the darkness of the bedroom, pulled the covers over his head. It didn't block out the sound. He eventually fell back into restless sleep.

"YOU USED A CRUST THAT'S BEEN NEXT TO DEAD RATS?" COREY ASKED as Lije shoved a slice of blueberry pie at him the next morning.

"They were in a bag."

"Speaking of bags, you should see your eyes."

"Shut up, kid."

"At least Mom and Mike wait to do it until I'm not around."

"I said, shut up."

Corey shut up. Lije drank his cup of coffee straight down and poured out another one.

"Listen," he said after a minute. "I'm not sure you should work out in the yard today. That Mort guy—"

"Dreamed about him last night," said Corey. "He and his wife were fucking—"

"Corey!"

"Well, that's what it was. It was gross. Humping away right in front of the kids."

"Look," said Lije, "I'm sorry."

"Hey, you and Holly, I mean, I guess...but these two, they're so gross I don't see how anyone could... Well," he finished lamely, "I guess those kids had to come from somewhere."

"Even gross people get the urge," said Lije. "Now if we could *please* get off the subject, I think you should stay out of the yard today. Holly said she'd—"

"Forget it," said Corey.

"I can tell you, but I can't make you."

COREY SHIVERED AT THE RUSTLING AMONG THE BAGS AS HE BRUSHED past them to get the spade from the back of the shed. *Lije's right, better the small rats than the big one...*

The light disappeared.

Mort filled the door frame.

Corey froze.

Mort pulled the door shut, became just another shadow in the sudden dark. Was he moving? Or was it a rat among the garbage bags?

Corey groped quietly for the spade.

His hand encountered fur, tail like a snake whipping around his fingers.

With a squeal to match the rat's, Corey snatched back his hand before

the teeth he knew were there could find it. He tripped on the broken rake and fell onto the rustling plastic mounds of the bags. Furry bodies wriggled, squealing, from under him. Mort's shadow loomed...

The sun came out.

He lay on green grass, under a perfect shade tree. The only clouds were marshmallow puffs, pure white against bright blue sky; M-shaped birds drifted in front of them, just like in the pictures he'd drawn as a little kid. A cool breeze carried the scent of roses from bushes that hedged a path winding to the top of a hill. And just over that hill lay all the pleasures promised in dreams. He wanted to dance along that path, turn somersaults, and when he reached the top, he'd roll downhill into...

*...Sweet Alice with hair so brown,
Who wept with delight when you gave her a smile,
And trembled with fear at...*

The hint of fear only intensified the delight...

Holly, framed in the sunlight that streamed through the door, lowered her clarinet.

Mort scrambled to his feet.

"You like them better than us," he said, like a resentful child. Holly stepped aside and Mort stomped out.

By the time Corey reached the door they were both gone.

NOW THAT HE WAS DOWN TO JUST SHOVELING, THERE WAS TOO MUCH opportunity to think.

What does Lije think about, shoveling away down in that grain ship? About Holly and what they were doing on the couch last night?

I wonder what she looks like with her clothes off?

Is that anything like what's in the shed?

Except it's a shed...

Each time Corey carried a freshly filled bag into the shed he looked around, trying, if not to recapture that exquisite shiver, to at least figure out what had happened. Each time, the remembered picture was a little fuzzier, like a snapshot carried in a pocket too long, until it becomes difficult to distinguish trees from storm clouds.

He'd read or heard, somewhere, that animals know when bad storms and earthquakes are about to happen. Was that what he'd felt? Or had he just been scared shitless by Mort, so damn glad to see Holly?

He went over the sad yellow grass with the broken rake.

"Hey, Duke!" he called as he returned the rake to the shed. But the Duke wasn't in the shed.

Just time to fix macaroni and cheese before Lije got home. Mom would say he ought to have a veggie with it. There were some peas in the freezer. But he remembered what else was in the freezer and decided on lettuce and some French dressing instead.

Table set, he returned to admire the back yard. The horrible children were quarrelling in the apartment above.

Lije's boots sounded in the basement.

"Jeez, kid," Lije said. "You've worked like a trooper."

Above them, the quarrelling grew louder, then faded into snickers. Something was thrown from the window.

Children, Corey, and Lije fell silent.

Lije strode forward and knelt beside the mangled rag of bloody black and white fur that had once been the Duke.

In the apartment above, the children recommenced quarrelling.

"Anywhere around here where the ground's soft enough to bury him?" Lije said at last.

"By the rose bush," said Corey, and went to get the spade.

Lije took off his T-shirt and wrapped the Duke's body in it. He laid broken bricks on the final mound.

"Oh, *shit*," said Corey when they returned to the basement. He grabbed a dishtowel, pulled open the oven and reached for the pan of blackened macaroni. The dishtowel wasn't folded thickly enough. He dropped the hot pan, threw the towel after the scorched mess, and took refuge in the shower until the hot water had run out completely.

He was out of tears as well.

Poor Duke. Poor Lije.

Shivering, Corey turned off the water.

He took his time toweling himself off and pulling on his clothes.

Poor Lije. Poor Duke.

He heard the oven door slam as he opened the bathroom door. Roasting meat? He reached the kitchen in time to see Lije going out the back door, carrying something.

The burned casserole congealed on the linoleum. The oven was still on. Corey turned it off.

A pie crust box lay empty on the counter, an empty garbage bag on the floor.

Corey opened the freezer.

It contained only the frozen peas.

Corey tore up the steps, around the corner, and up the outside stairs to the top floor apartment.

"Just being neighborly," Lije was saying, in the tone of voice from which Corey had learned years ago to make himself scarce. "Let me cut you a piece."

The door opened onto a kitchen where rats ran across the stove, scrambled over the dirty dishes in the sink to drink from the leaky tap, rummaged among spilled food and trash that littered the floor. On the table, three rose on their haunches, watching as Lije shoved Mort back into a chair, slapped the pie down in front of him, and began to cut.

"Some of these may have gone off a bit," Lije said. "But the Duke would

want you to have them.”

Small, claw-like hands grabbed Corey from behind. Two, even three, he might had been able to shake off, but this was half a dozen. Corey held his breath at the sharp scent of the children, shrank from their tiny yellow teeth as they grinned up at him, shoving and tugging him into the kitchen.

The horrible woman rose behind Lije, forced him down into a chair and pinned his arms behind him. The knife with which Lije had begun to cut the pie clattered to the floor.

The three watchful rats scattered as Corey was shoved up against the table, a child at either side of him, two at his back, two more clinging to his legs.

“Neighborly,” Mort chuckled. “You have some too.”

He reached into the sink for a fork and jabbed it into the pie. When he lifted it, it carried a half-cooked rat’s head.

Mort shoved the loaded fork toward Lije’s face. Lije jerked his head back, right between the woman’s enormous breasts. *She could smother him.* Corey began to struggle. Small teeth set into his ankle; only the denim of his jeans kept his skin intact.

“It’s good,” said Mort. “See? One for me,” and he shoved the forkful into his own mouth and began to chew, the skull crunching between his teeth. “And...” around the still unswallowed mouthful, “one for you!” He shoved a fresh forkful at Lije.

Corey began to struggle again. Small hands entangled themselves in his hair, shoved his head toward the pie. He could see a tail embedded in the lower crust. Shrill giggles rang in his ears. Shrill...

Music on the stairs.

Mort lowered the fork.

“You like them better than you like us,” he said.

The music came closer.

“It’s not fair,” said Mort.

Hands loosened, fell away. Corey pushed himself back from the table and turned.

“You promised,” said Mort. “You promised we could stay here.”

Holly leaned against the stair rail. A slight breeze molded the bright patchwork dress to her bony body. The lowering sun glanced from the silver fittings of the clarinet like a counterpoint to its raggy, dancy air.

The rats rose on their haunches, heads turned, ears pricked. One scurried across the floor, scampered out the door, as Holly lifted herself away from the rail and started down the stairs.

Another rat scurried past, and another, lines of dingy fur converging on the threshold, following the descending music. In the backwash of the flood of fur, half-a-dozen young gray rats scampered after a larger, older gray rat, and, last of all, a great, blackish-brown rat, a king among rats, humped himself across the threshold and down the steps.

Lije slumped alone at the table. Corey didn’t care. He leaped down the steps, two and three at a time, afraid that if he didn’t get there before the

music stopped...

The last of the rats disappeared into the shed. Corey flung the door wide and followed.

Holly stood at the crest of a grassy, sunlit hill. A sparkling stream edged with irises purred around the foot of the hill. Clusters of trees cast enticing patches of shade, and the path leading to where Holly stood was lined with fragrant roses. And just over the hill...

"Corey can handle it," his mother said behind him.

"He's responsible," Mike agreed.

Corey whirled around. "I'm sick of it!" he yelled in their faces. "I'm damn sick of it!"

He turned even as they faded, and ran pell-mell up the hill into the sweet scent of roses, toward that place just over the horizon where lay all the pleasures of being grown-up, and none of the responsibilities.

"Like 'em a little young, don't you?"

A panther-tattooed arm went around Corey's waist and he was flung bodily out of the shed, onto the recovering grass of the back yard. The scent of roses drifted over him. When he pressed his hands to the ground to lever himself to his feet, he felt the rough bricks of the Duke's grave against his palm.

Lije stood in the open door of the shed, hands braced against the frame, facing inward.

Past Lije, Corey could see Holly at the back of the shed. She no longer wore the patchwork dress. Her pale body and the fittings of her clarinet were the only bright spots in the dingy gloom. "Oh don't you remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt..."

"Lije!"

But Lije walked toward Holly, not looking back.

The back door shimmered, dissolved into misty green hills, roses, a trembling vapor pregnant with all of the pleasures and absolutely none of the responsibilities, a green and gold horizon beyond which lay...

"Earthquake!" Corey yelled.

The vision trembled, blurred, and Lije with it. Only Holly, high on the green hill, remained clear as the notes she played.

"Dad!" Corey yelled.

Lije stopped, but his eyes were still on Holly.

"Dad! If you don't buy me that beer when I'm sixteen, then who the hell will?"

Lije turned.

The ground moved like a wave under their feet, and they hit the floor together. The shed shivered, the rake and shovel clattered to the floor; the back door popped open.

Corey and Lije were alone in the shed.

Corey scrambled to the back door. Nothing but evening sun on the cracked pavement of the alley. He turned back to Lije.

Excited voices rose from the houses on either side. Their own house was empty and silent.

"How did you know?" Lije asked.

"About the earthquake? Instinct, I guess."

"I think I'd better take you to your grandma and grandpa's."

"What'll you tell them?"

"The truth. Well, part of the truth."

Lije reached in his pocket for his car keys. A paper fluttered to the ground. Corey picked it up and unfolded it.

One of Holly's flyers. Stamped across it in red was the single word "CANCELLED." 🍁

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The Z-Burger Simulations

Hugh A.D. Spencer

Food Logistics Summary:

***Family Joy Pack:** Four Soya patties, four carbohydrate surfaces, standard seasonal lubricants (three types). Twenty-four tuber strips saturated with Red Sauce No. 800, four gas-injected beverages random flavor and coloring). Add two plastic fantasy figures.*

Average Preparation Time: 2.35 minutes

Average Delivery Time: 2.03 minutes

Record-Optimum Preparation Time: 1.64 minutes

Record-Optimum Delivery Time: 0.54 minutes

Personal Note:

YOU KNOW YOUR GOALS!

JANICE WONG WAS JUST COMPLETING THE SATURDAY AFTERNOON SHIFT at the Z-Burger franchise down on Lakeshore Boulevard in Etobicoke. It had been a busy shift: two birthday parties, a bus filled with tourists from Cleveland, and some kids just in from little league practice.

The door computer told the shift captain that customer usage was up 22.3% over last week and that all of us on her team had responded

reasonably well to this challenge. None of us had come in below average times in delivery and preparation and we'd even approached some optimums. Janice had every reason to be proud.

So we all were surprised when she checked the readouts from the counters, closed the office door, and drove a long-bladed screwdriver into her temple.

She was dead by the time the paramedics arrived.

We were all working on automatic pilot by the time the new shift captain showed and made us clean up. I'm ashamed to say that all I noticed was that the stains on the desk and walls reminded me of our Tex-Mex Special Sauce.

Food Logistics Summary:

***Tex-Mex Special Sauce:** Create by adding Orange Dye No. 712 to edible hexachlorophene cleaning agent. Eight-to-one ratio. Mix in vats of no less than 200 liters.*

Z-BURGER, AS MANY OF THEIR COMMUNICATIONS SAY, "IS ALL ABOUT *people*," so you can imagine that one or two things happened after one of their more promising young manager-candidates unexpectedly killed herself.

Especially for those of us on her shift team. Before we left the restaurant, we were told that we wouldn't be going back to our off-campus apartment—we had already been assigned to a special "transitional training" facility.

So the next morning, I was sitting in an office in this facility, from where I could see the crumbling prison-like structures of the old Mississauga City Hall building. At least they hadn't moved me too far. The trauma counseling was about to begin.

Reverend Sweet from the International Church of Business was not much of a surprise. She was probably no more than five years older than me, close-cropped hair and a well-tailored jacket set around her clerical collar. I had the feeling that Reverend Sweet was planning on ascending the spiritual ladder without wasting a lot of time with Corporate grunts like me.

She sat behind a desk, holding a file folder with my name on it. When she opened it, I could see yellow stickers attached throughout.

"It says here that you're a convert," the Reverend said softly. "When did you join Z-Burger?"

Maybe that was a red sticker on that one. People from Outside are never completely trustworthy—too many of us just want to get out of the cold.

I smiled and hoped all that practice at the counter paid off.

"I had just turned sixteen," I replied. "I went into my remedials right after I left my birth family."

Reverend Sweet stopped at a page somewhere in the middle of my file.

She was looking very closely at something, like a seasoned practitioner of human archaeology.

"We don't seem to have very much on your mother..." she said eventually, "...but your father..."

"Was a devout Skinnerian." I decided that I might as well try to sound helpful and forthright: "I can still remember the big plastic cube he put over the playpen."

Reverend Sweet sighed and put her hands down on the paper, as if she was trying to compress my past down into a more manageable pile of events.

"Fine people, the Skinnerians," she said. "We have many common beliefs."

"Maybe that's why things worked out so well for me here," I said.

"Why did you have to leave your birth family?" Reverend Sweet asked

This could be tricky, I realized. I had to offer the right mixture of regret, resolve and gratitude. "It's very simple," I said. "I was laid off. My father's college salary was rolled back after restructuring."

"And some of the children had to go?"

"Just me." And it still hurts a little after all these years.

"Why you?" There wasn't a trace of sympathy in her voice. "Birth order seniority? Domestic productivity? Educational achievement?"

I shrugged. "It was a combination of things, really. I wasn't a very attractive child back then and I had scored low in both emotional and digital intelligence."

Reverend Sweet looked down and flipped ahead to something else in my file: "But it says that your scores increased considerably once you started your remedials."

"Yes." Then after a pause that was really too long, I added: "And I'm very grateful for that."

She closed my file and folded her hands. "We don't need to cover everything today, Andrew." Then she took a little gray book out her desk drawer. "You and everyone else on the shift have been subjected to a tremendous shock. You need to rest..." She handed me the book:

The Essential Works of Max Weber.

"...study...pray...and re-train."

Re-train! That was not what I wanted to hear.

"How long before I'm assigned to a new shift?" I asked, sure that my sudden concern was coming through.

Reverend Sweet stood up and gave me a professional smile. "We don't know. This kind of thing doesn't happen very often."

Food Logistics Summary:

Basic Z-Burger Components: Assorted chemical compounds. Carbohydrates. Synthetic protein molecules.

THE SIM CHAMBER LOOKED JUST LIKE A STANDARD SUBURBAN CLASS Z-Burger food service outlet: 250 seats, one hundred tables, eight service kiosks, two condiment dispensers, two washrooms. The seats had a little more reinforcement than usual, and in between exercises this weird blue lighting would kick in as the sensor computers made their assessments. When I was first trained in here my classmates would jokes about working at the “Atlantis franchise.”

Sim runs. What the hell did they have me doing simulation training for? Sure, I was shaken up, but I still knew how to flip a patty and program a fry computer.

Food Logistics Summary:

Special Meal Combo No. 83, a.k.a. “The Heavy, Hard, He-Man Hitter.” *Three nine-millimeter Soya patties, 700 metric measures of processed complex carbohydrates. Eighteen sauce combinations (equal portions), taste combinations to balance flavors No. 9 (garlic), No. 11 (chocolate) and No. 63 (assorted green vegetable matter).*

Average Preparation Time: 2.15 minutes

Average Delivery Time: 1.20 minutes

Record-Optimum Preparation Time: 1.33 minutes

Record-Optimum Delivery Time: 50 seconds

AT LEAST THEY DIDN’T HAVE ME DOING SISSY RUNS, ONE CUSTOMER asking for a coffee refill every twenty minutes. They were really cranking up the volume on these exercises, so I could show them what I was capable of.

In a weird way, I wanted to make Janice proud.

And they’d improved these androids since I was a trainee. There was more texture to the plastic skins, the movements were a lot more natural, and there was more variety in the hair. Frankly, the androids looked a lot better than our customers.

The programmers also had a more accurate understanding of fashion and social class. Most of the androids on my current run were wearing cheap suits with white shirts and clip-on ties—like lazy Baptists in search of after a quickie after-Church lunch.

It was a high density, high-demand crowd. In real-life, all that early-morning Bible-thumping would have made the customers really hungry. Of course, people at Church actually don’t always love each other equally, so they come in different group sizes with frequent and irregular timing...some people were travelling together and others weren’t.

There was also a big age range, some really doddering seniors (with bad hair and skin) and many toddlers (with their voices and speed controls set at maximum).

The only unrealistic thing was the fact that Sunday lunch was going on for over six hours. Wave after wave of happy androids kept bobbing up to my sales console.

I was able to take orders and handle deliveries without slipping below average but if we were providing actual food, I doubted that any real kitchen could have coped. But I guess the programmers had to stretch one or two variables to make some kind of point.

Service Training Vocal Exercise № 3:

May I take your order?

May I take your order?

*May I **take** your order?*

*May I take **your** order?*

*May I take your **order**?*

ALL THE RUNS THAT WEEK WERE PRETTY AGGRESSIVE, AND EARLY Saturday morning, they called me in for another interview with Reverend Sweet.

"I hope it's not a problem, meeting before breakfast." The Reverend was sipping a steaming fluid from a foam cup. "This the only time I have available."

I had a choice? She must have been trying to be funny.

"How is your re-training going?" she asked.

"Good, according to my personal timer," I replied grateful that I didn't yawn in the Reverend's face. It's not always easy to look motivated at 0500.

"They've emailed me the official scores already," she said. "I'm more interested in you feel about it."

"I see." How I feel? Why the hell would she care about that?

"I'm after some qualitative information," Reverend Sweet added.

The next forty-two minutes were kind of difficult; I had to use all the standard motivational phrases to describe the past week...and I had to sound like I meant it.

I'm not sure she bought it.

Market/Service Credos:

- *Perception of quality is inversely proportional to speed of delivery.*
- *Management practice and food content standards are equally plastic.*
- *You must be your customer to control your customer.*
- *Technology must anticipate psychographics—have the best machines first!*

I'D NEVER SEEN ANDROIDS LIKE THESE. FIVE YEARS AGO, KIDS WERE JUST represented as dolls in strollers or short store mannequins on roller skates. The logic was that since under-twelves didn't usually place the order or

dispense the cash, we didn't need to focus the training on them.

Things change, I guess. Kids are a huge market share and just because your hand isn't the one hanging onto the debit card doesn't mean you aren't the one making the buy. So there I was surrounded by twenty-two synthetic five-year-olds.

Very realistically rendered. As Janice's management textbooks used to say: "*Technology must anticipate psychographics.*"

That afternoon this translated into: *You must work in the electronic birthday party from hell!*

A very nasty run. Their little transparent plastic eyes were flashing around, taking in every detail of the playroom. And their speed controls must have been supercharged for the session, because they kept jumping out of their seats and throwing themselves into the ball pit. I wasn't sure how much longer the containment netting was going to hold up.

The ones that did stay at their tables were pulling the appendages off their action figures and smearing Soya paste all over the Wacky Crab Character wall mural.

Not only was I supposed to keep the solid and liquid substances flowing onto their plates, I had to keep these vibrating creatures from escaping and bothering the adult androids in the adjacent modules.

It was non-standard staffing conditions as well, ordinarily you had a team of three for birthday parties. This was a solo rite of passage for me.

It wasn't going particularly well, either. The mood range on the units were also set to tired and cranky and twenty minutes into the party, it was pretty apparent that they really hated their Wacky Crab loot bags. More appendages were flying around the room, and they started shredding the containers. I couldn't blame them, really—the action figures were small nasty knock-offs of a much cooler toy that was selling at all *We-Have-All-Your-Toys* outlets. Some bastard in programming had really been doing his research.

By the time I came in with the cake, my wrist scanner was telling me that I was way below the optimums and I was going to have to hustle to hold on to the averages. And now the little robot monsters were using what was left of their action figures as spoons to scoop up the remains of their milkshakes.

I wondered if it I could find some way to re-set *my* mood range, something that could be described with the words "hyper-speed." Then I decided to scratch that thought. Z-Burger strongly disapproves of direct intervention at the blood-brain barrier, even in the cause of Corporate efficiency.

I lit five candles and led the little androids in a chorus of "Happy Birthday." The programmers had been a little weak on the vocal settings. Ouch, my ears.

In fact, they were singing so loud, that it was almost twenty seconds before I heard the ragged gasping and gurgling sounds at one of the tables. One of the androids had sucked one of the legs off his action figures, and it was lodged in its artificial windpipe. More excellent simulation programming:

its fake eyes were wide open and the pseudo-skin was going from bright red to purple.

I ran over to the unit in trouble, not even noticing that one of the other units had pushed the birthday cake onto the floor. I knew that an android can't choke to death but it was still a damn scary run.

And a deep paranoid part of me wondered what would happen if this wasn't if this wasn't a planned part of an exercise. What if a \$40 million piece of equipment was having a major malfunction on my run? Last thing I needed.

I lifted the now-twitching unit onto the table-top and jammed my fingers down its throat. Android kids are a lot heavier and stronger than real ones so it wasn't easy to hold it down while I kept fishing around. My fingertips connected with something small and then a stream of already-been-chewed Z-Burger products shot themselves into my face and hair. Simulated vomit is about as repulsive as the real stuff, although it is perhaps a little less acidic.

If this was a real kid, I might have at least got a thank you from a parent or caregiver. In here, all I received was a warning message from my wrist scanner telling me that I had dropped below average service time. First time since I was a newbie.

I had a feeling I wouldn't be leaving just yet.

Service Training Vocal Exercise №7:

*"Thank **you**, have a nice day!"*

*"Thank you, **have** a nice day!"*

*"Thank you, have a **nice day**!"*

TWO MORE WEEKS. MANY MORE RUNS. SOME GOOD, SOME NOT-SO-GOOD.

I'd shot my service record to hell. Janice would probably be embarrassed to know me now.

"They're shipping me out." Anne was the only one left from my old shift.

She was leaning against the door frame of my room wearing a new uniform and an apologetic look on her face. It was a well-made uniform with lots of extra trim; she was going to a good location.

I looked up from the print-outs spread over my study-cubicle, diagrams of different restaurant configurations.

"When?" I asked.

"Tonight." Anne half-smiled, half-frowned at me. "Looks like you're on your own, kid."

Anne was great. Cute, funny, dependable. Z-Burger officially discouraged relationships on the same shift, but we all got so close, that (of course) they happened all the time. If I hadn't been otherwise engaged, I think I could have gone for Anne in a big way.

"So you're abandoning me to the Planet of the Newbies," I replied, trying to sound clever.

“Try not to pass out from the smell of dirty diapers.”

“Guess I won’t have anyone to swap war stories with.” I think I sounded more desperate than witty, but the truth has a bad habit of creeping out in times of emotional stress.

I realized that this really going to be shitsville now, there was no way would any trainees understand what I was going through.

“Well, I gotta go,” Anne said finally. “You should try to work with Reverend Sweet.”

When I turned around to look at Anne, she was gone.

What the hell did that mean?

When I looked down at my print-outs, I noticed that my diagrams had gone all blurry.

Food Logistics Summary:

Late-Bird Special: *standard patty, reduced diameter by 0.5 centimeters. Nine additional measures of syntha-herbal stimulants. Deep fry carbo-strips until crispy. Inject strips with 2.5 units artificial chocolate.*

Optimum Preparation Time:

ASAP, to maximum degree. *Do not divert any attention to monitor your performance, just deliver the food. This approach has proven to be the most effective means of minimizing damages to Corporation property and personnel.*

Even though it was 0720 (i.e. morning) they had turned the lights down low in the chamber and were using some kind of new projectors to make it look like there were some burning buildings in the distance.

Extreme late shift, in a very bad area code. Great...*fun-fucking-tastic...*

Three more-or-less human figures appeared at the doorway, pushed open the opaque mesh panels, and walked inside.

We serve everyone...(Z-Burger Credo Number One)...regardless of social class and danger to employees.

The androids arrived at my counter. Their faces and arms were marked with multi-colored smears and deep angular scars. Their hair could only described as sturdy demonstrations of chaos theory.

Classic nocturnals, the androids and the reals got the cosmetic effect in the same way—by injecting intelligent plastics and molding their bodies with nasty metal implements. These were well-researched androids...weird and dangerous...but really well-researched.

“Hi!” I said, trying to sound friendly and harmless. “Welcome to Z—”

The fucking things didn’t even bother to place an order. Two of them leapt over the counter, grabbed me by my tunic and threw me onto the linoleum.

Ouch.

The third one picked up a chair and used it to smash the condiments dispensers. Red, green, and yellow fluids were flying everywhere. Then he started breaking windows while the other two kicked me in the face and ribs.

More ouch.

By now, I was definitely screaming and coughing up blood as their titanium-toed boots pummeled into me. But a part of my brain was very calm, assessing the situations in terms of optimums, averages, performance and simulator credibility. That part of my brain was thinking that this was a really good simulation. Every detail was right.

Food Logistics Summary:

Rise-Up Special: Vitamin C, Caffeine (maximum dose), herbal mock-barbiturates...

I WAS STILL IN THE SIM CHAMBER WHEN I WOKE UP. THE NOCTURNALS were gone and no one had cleaned the place up.

The place still looked like a 3D Jackson Pollock.

I was covered in dried fluids: relish, ketchup, mustard, Soya sauce, my own blood. I hoped that was all I was covered in.

I swallowed a few fragments of my teeth and slowly sat up. The pain was almost transcendental. I thought about throwing up, but decided that was a bad idea.

My vision eased back into focus and I saw that there was one table left standing.

Reverend Sweet was sitting at it, sipping a cup of something. That meant the restaurant was still operational.

Pretty impressive logistics, I thought.

"Learning much?" she asked.

"Like what?" I croaked.

"Have a seat."

She watched me closely as I climbed to my feet and staggered over to the table.

God, it hurt to sit down.

"Don't you want to leave this place?" She smiled at me, but there was probably more warmth on the surface of Pluto.

"Ah..." Talking was hard because my mouth was still filled with blood and phlegm. "Yeah, I think I'm ready for a new assignment."

The ringing in my ears made Reverend Sweet's voice sound strange—metallic and hollow—like a really old and cheesy android.

"Let's be pretty candid," she said. "I'm not going to get my commission unless my report on Janice gives a plausible explanation of her death."

It even hurt to nod my head.

"Gee, that's really tough."

The Reverend's robot voice continued: "Z-Burger's people are the happiest, best-motivated employees in the world." She leaned forward and looked at me with a protein-carbohydrate gaze:

"So, they don't kill themselves unless someone has been fucking around with their heads."

I didn't say anything. I just reached into my mouth and removed another tooth fragment.

"You and Janice had been having sexual intercourse for at least six months, had you not?"

Sexual intercourse. Not "sleeping together," not "being intimate" and not "you two were lovers." And to her, "fucking" was reserved for a completely different realm of experience. The Reverend definitely had an interesting turn of phrase.

Eventually she gave up waiting for me.

"Usually the Company doesn't ask the Church to intervene," she said. "It's sad, but for some managers, the occasional physical release seems to make them more effective."

I nodded a little.

"You're welcome," I said softly.

The Reverend responded with a wry smile. "You are obviously a mistake and someone in Personnel will probably have to pay for that. Unfortunately, we can't just terminate you."

"Because of all the training you've invested." I'm sure my broken, blood-stained smile was pretty gross.

"I wonder what other Outside ideas you poisoned that poor woman with?" Reverend Sweet stared into the cooling pool in her Styrofoam cup. "Drugs? Sexual perversion? Collective bargaining?"

I responded to her statement with a wet sigh.

"She would have done anything to be a better manager," I said. "I think she chose me *because* I came from Outside."

Reverend Sweet crooked an eyebrow. "Because you wouldn't judge her so severely?"

"Didn't matter." For the first time since Janice died, I felt like crying about it. "She didn't stop judging herself."

Forgive me, Janice, I thought. I was tired, broken in spots and in a lot of pain. I still don't think they deserved to know that much.

Shift Log Entry:

AS PER MY CHECKLIST, I REVIEWED THE FINAL MAINTENANCE REPORT:

The condiments dispenser has jammed again, third time this week on my shift! I just can't seem to get the technicians to fix them properly.

Who knows how many innocent customers have been deprived of their basic rights to their free-choice of optional seasonings? I am ultimately responsible

for this continued failure. It is a certain sign of Damnation.

I am a worthless slut. God hates me.

JANICE KILLED HERSELF BEFORE SHE DOWN-LOADED HER LOG ENTRY INTO the Company mainframe. A surprising oversight for her. I don't remember it, but I must have taken her wrist computer when we were cleaning up.

I was probably just being a coward, trying to cover up evidence of our relationship. But after a while, keeping her thoughts, dreams and nightmares away from the Cyclops-vision of Z-Burger...and Reverend Sweet...got to be pretty important.

Even though Janice was only able to express herself in their terms.

I never did officially admit anything, so eventually the Reverend had to give up her hopes of filing a complete report and receiving her commission.

Finally, they reassigned me, way out in the fringes, where I couldn't do any harm.

My current shift captain is about ninety-nine years older than God—so old that you can't tell the scars from the wrinkles. Definitely crazy—in many loud and annoying ways. I'm much more likely to put a screwdriver into my head before he does.

He's really religious too, and he leads us in an opening prayer when we start the graveyard shift:

"Lord, help us bring sustenance and wondrous things to the worthless scum who live here without too many of your good servants getting killed."

Amen.

Since he's crazy, the people at Inventory Control don't ask about all the trays that go missing here. The Captain lets us wear the trays under our tunics; not the best body armor, but at least it's some kind of protection.

I guess this is some kind of punishment, but actually when I'm not scared out of my mind, I feel kind of free. Before this, when I was on Janice's shift I really was a pretty straight arrow—pretty much innocent of all the shit that the Reverend accused me of.

And nobody's going to convince me that there was anything wrong with getting close to Janice.

Maybe it's the neighborhood that makes me feel free. It's certainly free of architecture—our restaurant is the only building that's still standing with all four of its walls intact.

Captain is very proud of that.

Drugs, rock and roll, revolution.

There's lots of that out here in the fringes and I'm picking it up fast. Maybe someday there will be an opportunity to show the Reverend and the rest of the Company what I've learned.

Then we can all have a really nice day. ♣

Goodbye, Palindrome Bob

Steve Mohn

THIS WAS A WHILE AGO. EASTERN KANSAS. GRASSLAND carved by streams, dry at that time of year, the grass a rust ocean around and ahead of me.

Behind me, a bad story. Fired from the hospital pharmacy. Guess why. So she kicks me out of her place, chased by her favorite reason, an empty that took the right tail light out as I left in my appropriately yellow Fury III. I had a tank of leaded gas, two packs of Old Golds and eight hundred bucks from dealing Darvon.

“Ever have alligator?”

“Once,” I said. “Down in Florida.”

“You think it tasted like chicken?”

“No, I thought it tasted like snake.”

“Oh.”

He looked like the milder sort of Jesus with a short pointy beard, orange like his shoulder-length center-parted hair. Blue eyes. He kept wishing I had some pot. I had reds, yellow jackets, black beauties, even Percodan, big ochre ones, hard to choke down but *so* good. But he wouldn't help drive. Said he didn't know how.

I'd picked him up back in Indiana. “You know you look like Jesus?” I said and he sighed, “Yeah, I hear that a lot.”

The sky was that evenly bright November gray. Cold rain. Possibly snow. My tires were just tires. I couldn't cross the Rockies in snow.

Twenty years later I said, "What made you think of alligator just now?" "Nothin'."

"You hungry? There's one of those Red Barns up here."

He slumped lower in the seat, arms folded. "I get off pretty soon."

"Well, let me know, so I don't miss your exit."

He sighed. "I'll just jump out."

I pictured him against blurred weeds, pea coat thrown open, orange hair wild in the wind. But he pointed at a green exit sign, a US route number on it. I coasted onto the ramp. At the stop sign I asked, "You going south or north?" He said south. I turned. "Figured I'd hit Oklahoma," I explained. "Cross the Mojave from the tip of Nevada out to LA. Miss the snow."

"That's cool."

The rust grass showed more of those deep-cut stream beds, hairy with leafless black brush. Not a billboard or even a mailbox. Way off, some grain elevators.

"Must be missile silos around here," I said.

"Have to ask—" Then he tightened up.

"Ask who?" I said.

"Someone local." He faced his window. "I'm not from around here, man."

"But you're staying with someone." No answer. "Thing is, I could use a place to crash. I haven't slept in so long? Last time was off the road. I mean even if it's just a barn or somethin'..."

Still low in the seat, arms folded, he said to his window, "It's like a religious community, where I'm going."

"What, like real strict? No smoking?"

"Not like that," he said, squirming as if he shouldn't tell me. "It's called The Meetinghouse of the Arrivalist."

Years ago I'd given a Hari Krishna five dollars in an airport. I still wanted my money back. "Who's the Arrivalist?"

He shrugged. "Some dude's gonna arrive, I guess."

"Uh-huh." People think I don't like religion. And they're right. To me it's just dumb to think there are people in the sky who make things like rain happen. Most of it's harmless BS, who cares? But those evangelicals? Mostly on the radio then but some of them were already working TV. Jayzus this or Jayzus that! In that twang. Or quoting First Moravians or whatnot—as if shouting at the universe will actually make it behave in certain ways? Of course they hate that you need math and physics to understand anything. That's why gods in the sky are so neat: they never have to explain. They can just bang people in their sleep and it's cool. Or roast whole cities—but if *we* do that it's the end of the world. So you know it's all really just a racket. Like that Hari Krishna in the airport?

Still, I wouldn't have minded a place to stay, get a good solid twelve hours. I could put up with some crap. It's not as if I never have.

"These people get high at all?" I asked.

My hitchhiker narrowed his blue eyes. "Said you didn't have any pot."

You know: accusatory? Like they get in your car: Got any pot? Yeah. Gimme some. Hey, sure—here, smoke the whole bag.

I didn't answer him straight. I said, "What do they like getting high on?" "Grass." He thought it over. "Ludes. Downers."

"Must be a quiet meetinghouse."

He nodded, upbeat for a change. "Not many people know about it."

I LIKED OLD MOVIES WHEN I WAS A KID. FORTIES STUFF, LIKE *LON CHANEY Meets the Wolfman*, but '50s SF too, like on "Chiller Theater" Saturday nights or "Monster Movie Matinee"—*It Came From Outer Space* and *Invisible Invaders* and *Terror From the Year 5,000*. They reeked. But they worked. Things always getting into you, living there? All that suggested penetration. Like in *The Mummy*, just before Jack Armstrong rushes in and says the magic words that turn Imhotep back into stale bread, Karloff presses that ceremonial stone knife slowly against the girl's belly? It gave me such a boner I was worried.

And the music always told you when the Thing was waiting in the dark. My car radio didn't work, so no music, nothing ominous as we drove up this long stick of road, the Farm of the Dead slowly rising, burn-black, from the rusted grass. The house was pointy with pitched gables in that gothic way. And, all over—like the stubborn hairs that grow out of moles and won't give up no matter how many times you pull them?—old iron lightning rods with stars and crescent moons worked in. The barn slanted one way, doors open like a howl. Cars on blocks. Between the house and barn, a flat-top privy like a black tent stake.

I *did* like the big plastic doll, the kind they don't make anymore, as big as a kid with a nylon blond permanent and those lunatic blue eyes that roll open. She stood naked on the porch, faintest suggestion of budding breasts, one stiff arm raised to greet the Earthmen.

We sat parked for a second and I just started to laugh.

"Come on," Jesus told me, grinning. "Let's go in, meet the folks."

I swung my door out. "They do anything for money, these people?"

"I don't know." He waved one arm like an oar. "Farm, I guess."

Because it was Kansas, I had expected corn, wheat. Later, I learned that all that began further west. This was grazing land, though I hadn't seen anything grazing on it either. It was the direst country I had ever seen, black on rust under gray. Without going over to look in, I couldn't be sure, but the barn looked empty; leaning like that, there was either no hay in the loft or it had shifted all to one side. I had grown up in Pennsylvania, not on a farm but near enough to know a working farm from one that hadn't been worked in years.

I don't think Jesus was getting any kind of feeling from the place. Knocking at the front screen door, he seemed like any casual caller, fully expecting someone to answer. Already, I knew better. It wasn't a premonition or anything. It was knowing what abandoned things look and

feel like. I'd found them in the woods when I was a kid. One-room cabins with a door and a single window; giant baling machines of sheet zinc and wooden pulley wheels, left to rot where they'd broken down; a whole house with well-lit rooms and double-hung windows, every pane of glass in place—till some kids, horsing around, set fire to it. Back east, vines would have gotten to a place like this, growing over it, slowly pulling it down.

Jesus said, "God damn," and called, "Anybody home?" and knocked louder.

"Screen door isn't latched," I said, pointing. Was he blind?

Rather than try the door, he backed away and looked at it. I stepped up, pulled it wide and rapped on the solid door, waited, then pounded it. A small four-paned window at head-level wore a curtain, yellow with red chickens, blue eggs.

I turned a doorknob hand-polished down to white metal and went in.

Dust lay on the linoleum like thin fog. In the center of the kitchen, a big slab table, gray and dry as bone. Bowls on it held clays of soup or gravy, pudding or pie filling, each with deep concentric cracks. I smelled something cold and metal-sweet and dark that just reminded my gag reflex what it was for.

The refrigerator door was open, no light inside, no motor hum. I touched the switch that should have made a white florescent ring in the ceiling flicker and jump on. Lifting the phone from its hook was like hearing the thoughts of a cave. Not a clock ticked. Why would it? No one there had appointments.

I'D HAD NO EXPERIENCE WITH SO MUCH DEATH. AND, MORE THAN anything, it was the *ground* I couldn't get over, and still can't get over, the physical lay of the land, as if that could have had anything to do with it. Even after going through the house—the first floor, I couldn't make myself go upstairs—I stood out back on what must have been a lawn once, smoking one after another, helping the smoke down with a quart of rye the mice hadn't gotten to first; and it was the rust-colored grass and dry streams cutting down into that fur, like creases in a dog's hide, if I can think what kind of dog it is that has that color, that held me. Held me up, I think.

Jesus was still inside. I was still calling him that in my mind and I decided to go on calling him that. It made me—me, the village atheist—feel better somehow that Jesus was in the house with all those dried-up dead people.

See, I started losing count after thirty-five, and that was just in the downstairs rooms. I was shaking a little bit but not because I was scared. They weren't that scary because they'd been dead for a long time. Long enough that there was just that tang on the air, dark and cold and metal-sweet. Long enough that the rats had carried off their protein and, as rats will, had moved on. Long enough that, dead-dry, they were more interesting than scary. But I had started losing count and had actually found myself stopping to count on my goddamn fingers how many I had counted so far.

Because I had started to *count* them. See what I mean? Walking along like a moron, going, "One, two, three..."

So I'd gone back out to the kitchen, had started through the cupboards, found the quart and went to my car for smokes. That was how, smoking and drinking right out of the bottle, I had come to the back yard and the edge of the rusty grass to stare at a dry stream cut into the flat land, deeper than wide and furred with that same grass, full of low brush and small trees, bare limbs thick with branches splitting into hairy-looking twigs. I didn't *like* how they looked. It was like looking at someone's armpit.

I lit another cigarette. Behind me, my hitchhiker said, "Hey, man."

I gulped smoke and liquor. "What?"

"You freakin' out?"

I sort of gestured with the bottle.

But I wasn't drunk. I had too much adrenalin rushing me like linebacker acid. Also, at the car, not taking Jesus for the drinking type and knowing I was going to kiss most of a quart, I had eaten two hits of speed. I felt prepared, in a vague way.

"They weren't supposed to have left for a couple of years," he said.

I just nodded, you know, drank some more.

He said, "I guess they couldn't get word to me or something."

"Guess not," I said. "Course, they didn't just stop paying their bills. More like they discontinued service. 'Cause if they hadn't, people would've come out to check. Eventually, some state cop would've forced the door," I shrugged, "and we wouldn't be here now."

I hung my head then, squinting as if puzzled. The speed hadn't kicked in yet, but the liquor was starting to. I turned slowly, and this time inspected the blue eyes framed by center-parted hair like new copper wire. The fine-cut features on his lean face could have made him rodential, but merely made him bland. Even with the pointy beard, he was reminding me of a girl I had liked when I was six.

"Why *are* we here?" I asked, because suddenly it didn't make sense.

"You're here 'cause you wanted a place to sleep," he reminded me, sighing.

All that sighing, like I was a stale sandwich he kept finding in his lunch box. "But why aren't you sad or upset? I mean I thought you *knew* this Meetinghouse-of-the-Survivalist crowd."

"Arrivalist," he corrected.

And he *would*, I thought. Correct me over a nothing mistake. "Arrivalist," I said with a fresh little bow. "Well, I thought you knew them. They're lying in there like mummies..." I pointed with the bottle, saw the damage done to it and capped it. "This is unreal," I muttered, then cracked: "It's a separate reality, man. Real trip and a half!" I yelled. He just watched me. I shook my head, pulled on the cigarette, tried to feel if the speed was hitting. It was—a dry swallow, a sense of witless optimism, a feeling that my skeleton was a high-tone tuning fork. "So what you gonna do?"

His thin shoulders jerked in a kind of shrug. "I don't know what to do. I

can't get back now."

"You got here okay. You'll get back to Indiana."

"I'm not from Indiana."

"Yeah, okay." I didn't much care where he was from. I'd started from Boston.

He said, "I'm an alien."

I looked at him. And, of course, I heard: *space alien*; then told myself that was just his highfalutin way of saying: *not from around here*. I said, "Me too."

"No, no!" He swung his head back and forth as if bees lived in it. Pulling his hair, eyes squeezed shut, he shouted, "I can't get out now! I can not get out of here!" And then, still holding hanks of that orange hair, he looked at me, his blue eyes as wide as they would go, and his mouth wide open too, like that drawing or woodcut everyone sees in high-school art class? And they try to figure out what it means and who the guy is standing on the bridge?

And, like that picture, he didn't make a sound. I wondered if this was him or me, a funny combination of speed and rye and too many cigarettes and not enough sleep. He didn't even seem to be breathing. Some sort of delayed reaction to what he had found inside—after all, he had certainly not expected to find them poisoned (I guessed) in dehydrated floral patterns on the floors of the downstairs rooms, bony hands joined, skulls almost touching. Whatever was in those bowls on the kitchen table, I thought, would probably interest a forensic chemist.

I knew about forensic chemistry, a real little, because I'd worked in a hospital pharmacy. Not as a pharmacist. Not even as a technician. I was a messenger, going from the basement pharmacy to the floors with a little wire basket of IV-drip bottles and medications. I'd leave them at the nurse's stations, pick up the empties and take them back to the pharmacy, where I had been bad but they couldn't prove anything. But from casual talk around the place, I knew what a forensic chemist was, and that he could not tell your suicide from your heart attack (for insurance purposes) if you had injected yourself with a 30 mg solution of potassium or sodium chloride—either will work—because 30 mg gives you time to hide the paraphernalia, while 60 mg poleaxes you dead.

And I was thinking that I had drugs in my car from that pharmacy, and there were many dead people in the house, probably from drug overdoses, and I shouldn't be here, drunk and on speed, with a guy I call Jesus who says he's an alien.

Still locked in his fit—but he was breathing, at least. Then his eyes shut and he wept, showing his teeth.

FOR A WHILE I SAT WITH HIM ON THE GROUND, ARM AROUND HIM, sharing the rye. I had let a childish feeling of dread creep into me so I sat with my back to the desolate rust sea of grass with the black armpit hair growing out of the ravines, and faced the house, looking past it at that long

stick of road, lined with leaning starved-looking telephone poles, black stroke marks that cut toward a main road I could not see. I hadn't seen so much as a bird. The overcast was as solid as it had been since dawn, a little darker, no variation in the gray, no breath of wind under it. I was cold but not wind-chilled.

After a while he stopped sobbing and started lapping at the bottle. I drove the car around back of the house, ate some more speed from the stash and took two Seconal to Jesus so he wouldn't lock up in another fit. Maybe he'd fall asleep and I could get him in the car and get us both out of there. Then, later, if he wanted to bring official attention to the farm and everything, he could do that and I would be long gone, just some guy who'd given him a ride.

He was sitting with his legs straight out, leaning a little on the bottle planted between them. It was down by a third but most of that was me. I can drink a quart in two days. I used to brag about that but I can't remember what it's like to be straight. Far as I'm concerned, even cigarettes are dope. It all affects your brain.

He raised his head with some difficulty, weaving, and focused on me.

"I'm a nalian." Shook his head. "I cannnn go home again."

"Funny," I said, "you look like us."

He nodded. "Thasss right."

Used to be they couldn't afford to make them look like anything else for more than a few scenes, so they wrote in how they "could assume our appearance" and ran it into the ground. Every B-movie actor in the business knew how to do the alien sleepwalk, alien funny-speak, the old stone-face. Jesus didn't quite have it yet.

"Where is home for you, anyway?" All that speed had frozen the alcohol and I was skating on it. It would thaw though. It always does.

"Home," he said, carefully shaping the word, squinting into the distance.

"Look," I said, "we sort of have to get out of here soon. Prob'ly no one's been here in two, three years but this would be just the day they pick, 'cause they want to use the phone. So where's home? Where do you live?"

I thought I'd drive him to the next big-enough town and put him on a bus to someplace like Omaha, with enough reds to keep him happy. By then I'd be in New Mexico, maybe Arizona—I knew a guy with a motorcycle shop in Prescott. Maybe I could get a used bike for the car, change my whole tune.

"Live?" He grinned at me with that crafty look drunks think is such a winner, because it's a look they can actually paste on, then pointed at the side of his head. "I live in near." He spread all his fingers across his chest. "An dear." He saw the bottle, bowed over to peer down into it and swung blindly.

I stepped in and grabbed it. I didn't want him to spill it. I was afraid if he did I'd hit him with it.

The speed had me cutting looks over my shoulders and talking to myself. At the trunk of the car, I bought myself another drink, then packed the bottle

away. I got another Seconal, went around to the front of the house (not through the house) to the kitchen for a glass of water and brought it back to my pet drunk. I brought back that big naked doll from the front porch too. That joke wasn't funny anymore. I wondered whose joke it had been. I tried to stand her up but she fell and I said the hell with it and made Jesus take his third pill. I would get him in the car and let him pass out. Then we could leave.

In what seemed like an hour but was more like fifteen minutes, I lit and threw away three cigarettes, smoking into bottomless lungs. I took the big blond doll to the back porch and thought that her standing there would be just as bad and carried her under one arm to the barn. I didn't trust the barn enough to go in, I just stood her against the wall inside by the door and went back to see how Jesus was.

He was asleep on his side and would probably stay that way for twelve hours. I got him into a fireman's carry—I'm not Superman, he was just really light—and laid him out on the back seat with one of my light-weather jackets under his head and the blanket I'd been using thrown over him.

He woke up to tell me, "I yam a nalian!" and fell asleep again.

I shut the door and went back to clean up the cigarette butts, gathering them into an empty pack I'd dug out of the car ashtray. I wadded the pack and threw it as far as I could. It never hit the ground. It just hung in the air for a long time and then I blinked and it was gone.

I felt the house at my back then. I turned, but no, the dead were not walking at me slowly with their arms straight out. But I noticed again those funny lightning rods against the overcast. Then I glanced down the road lined with telephone poles. There were no wires.

FOR A LONG TIME IT WAS JUST ME, DRIVING. IT GOT DARK AND, OUT there, dark is dark. It might have been outer space. It reminded me of being a kid and it's late and we're driving home from somewhere, Dad smoking, Mom dozing with her arms crossed, a guy on the radio calling a ball game. My little brother asleep in the middle in back, my big brother looking out the window on his side. The green dashboard dials and the hum of the tires and, outside, farmhouse lights like stars passing, closer than real stars. The sky and the ground the same dark. Me, in my spaceship.

I heard him sit up in back. "Where are we, man?"

"Albuquerque, pretty near." A glow beyond the mountains, like stars behind those big dust clouds that stretch light-years? I felt all right, not drunk, not speeding, just awake. "You okay?"

He set his elbows on the seat back. "Hung over. Thirsty."

"Truck stop up here," I said. "Get some gas, eat something."

"Yeah." I thought he would sigh but he didn't. I felt his nerves right through the upholstery. "What all did I say back there?"

I waved at the rearview mirror, back there.

He was quiet. "You call the cops?"

"No." I looked in the dark for a reason. "Far as I could tell, no one back there did anything they didn't want to do."

He sighed then. "It's a free country."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "They were already dead. Those people. Before we came."

"I thought there was something about them." It wasn't smart mouth, just me, talking. Already dead. Okay. "What's your name? I forget."

"Bob. It's just a palindrome. My real name I can't pronounce with a larynx." He started gagging then sneezed convulsively then stopped. "Best I can do."

The nickel dropped. It's called *architecture* when a nut goes into all this detail to back up what a nut he is? I said, "So where you gonna go?"

He breathed in, then out. "I don't know, man. I need a life. Bad."

"Don't you know anyone else?"

"They were it. I was just bummin' around. I don't know why they left so fast. Went to all that trouble to find that place? Set up in those bods?"

He was starting to talk like me. I do this upward inflection? Like I'm Southern but I'm not? He was doing that. I sighed and pushed in the lighter. Then we topped the mountain and the glow we'd been driving at laid Albuquerque out like a grid on the valley floor, blocks of gold and white light with blue worked in, connected by red tail lights and sodium-vapor dotted lines.

"It's like hitting a big spaceport."

He didn't bat it out of the stadium; it was a bunt. But he kind of won me with it. "How big they run?" I asked, just because.

"If they lens the jumpways?" He thought it over. "Six light-minutes across."

How far light, at 186,000 miles a second, goes in six minutes. It takes eight for sunlight to reach Earth. I heard the cigarette lighter pop. And that was when I got it about that doll on the porch.

Not waving hello but goodbye, Bob.

Floating down to the Albuquerque spaceport, I watched the pattern spread. I'd felt better when he was the sighing Jesus I didn't have to like. But that doll, left like that. Believers joining the one-ness of the whatness, or aliens heading home after the picnic—why not just cut her plastic fingers off but leave a middle one?

IN THE DARK, TRUCK STOPS ARE BIG BLOCKS OF WHITE LIGHT. "LET'S GET some food," I said. Bob said he couldn't afford it. "Come in and eat. I have money." He wouldn't order so I did, more than I could have handled alone. Then he gave in. I thought he'd eat the waitress next and said so and the inevitable joke(s) made us laugh.

We gassed up the Fury and left. As the dawn turned mountain rock lavender, I let him drive some. He caught on fast and I finally got some sleep. ♣

2002 On Spec Theme Issue

“O for a muse of fire...”

*O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention.*

— King Henry V, Prologue

IT'S NO SECRET THAT WRITERS, SUBCONSCIOUSLY OR DELIBERATELY, often look to the Bard for their inspiration. Speculative fiction is no exception. So we're pleased to announce the 2002 Theme for *On Spec*... "Inspired by the Bard," or "Shakespeare, 2002."

Deadline for theme-related stories is the end of this year. We'd like to publish a special "Theme segment" in each of the four issues of 2002, rather than having a single "Theme issue."

What we DON'T want to see:

- Same old stories from a minor character's point of view. Unless you happen to be Tom Stoppard, it probably won't work.
- *What if?* stories. What if Hamlet did not die at the end... what if Shylock really did get his pound of flesh... what if... Well, you get our drift.
- "Reverse" stories. *King Lear* as a sitcom, *Macbeth* with Glinda the good witch, and so on. Just don't go there.
- Tacked-on SF trappings with the same old tune. "Romeo and Juliet in outer space"...
- In short, we don't actually want to see *any* of Shakespeare's actual characters walking through the stories.

What we ARE looking for:

- Strong themes/strong emotions...revenge, jealousy, love, hate, alienation.
- Characters facing a crisis...making choices that affect their relationships with others, perhaps altering the course of their lives.
- Magical fantasy stories, mistaken identities, conniving servants, the occasional gravedigger.
- Archetypes that *work*...use what Will Shakespeare did, but put your own stamp on it. Take it somewhere (and *somewhen*) new. ♣

— Diane L. Walton, General Editor

Foster Child

Catherine MacLeod

THE BABY CAME IN THE MAIL ON MONDAY, ARRIVING as Claire Warren's grocery bag tore. She marked its entry by screaming as marmalade mashed her instep. Claire yowled through her teeth and made a fist, then realized she still had the mail in that hand.

"Uh, ma'am?" She turned back to the open door and managed a smile for the mailman. "You have another package."

"Oh. Thanks." She glanced at the postmark. Did she know anyone in Hastings, Kentucky?

"You gonna be okay, ma'am?"

"Yes, thanks." She shut the door behind him and flipped the box. The sender was *Starway Collectibles*. It took her a minute. Right-SF mail-order company. She'd sent the order last month. She hobbled through the groceries and opened the box with a steak knife.

The baby was *ugly*.

It was one of those gag alien embryos she'd seen advertised, wrinkled and gray, floating in a jar of sludge. Tendrils of something white and wispy drifted around it. She set it on the counter and dug through the box. Her receipt listed the contents as "Paperback: *Trust No One*."

Claire chalked another one up for Monday. She made a mental note to check *Starway's* return policy, and maybe call them tomorrow. The embryo was from one of those novelty companies that sold "pickled" noses, fingers and eyeballs. Their appeal was beyond her. She turned away and promptly forgot about it.

She stacked the food in the cupboards and carried the crumpled mail down the hail. Application for cable TV; didn't want it. Flier for Tracy's Hair Salon; didn't need it. She opened the phone bill, noting the minimal cost of an unlisted number. There were no calls. The only person who knew her address was the clerk who mailed her alimony. She slid that one in the nightstand drawer.

Having the checks forwarded guaranteed her privacy, though she couldn't imagine her ex showing up—in meditating on her marriage, *Jason wasn't there* had become her mantra. The night the burglar smashed the bedroom window, Jason wasn't there. The day the dog got hit by a car, Jason wasn't there.

And the morning of her miscarriage, she knew he wasn't going to be.

Claire shucked her clothes on the way to the shower and grabbed the shampoo. The stubble on her head was long enough to be called hair now.

Jason said the baby's loss had unbalanced her, and she allowed there might be some truth in that. She'd cried at odd moments, making it hard to go out with his law partners. She'd stopped playing tennis with their wives—she was sick of their scrutiny. She didn't remember cutting her hair off. She did remember Jason asking her to leave. She took his alimony because it was be alone with money or be alone without, and she didn't lay blame. Divorce was too much like their marriage for that: she had comfort and means, and Jason wasn't there.

Claire thought of that as her time in the darkness, and felt herself traveling back to the light. She did the Saturday crossword. She slept late. She hung a bird feeder. She had hundreds of paperbacks she'd never had time to read. She read them now.

She carried one out to the kitchen, plugged in the kettle, and unlocked the glass door to the backyard. The sun was nearly down. The wind dried her hair in seconds, silver-blond going silver-gray. The garden here was still half-wild. She was taming it slowly.

Claire liked the wooden fence no one could see over. She liked the neighborhood where no one knew her nor cared to. She liked being among the missing.

The kettle whistled. She set tea to steep, and as she picked up *Stardance*, the embryo jar caught her eye again. It was ugly. Very. Claire shook her head in wonder at the mix-up. The doll was squashed and bent, folded at odd angles. Its eyes were large and set far back in its head. Their lids were almost transparent.

She nudged the jar, setting the fetus rocking gently in the murky liquid, and leaned close, watching it drift.

The baby opened its eyes.

"OH GOD."

The baby stirred. Its tiny hands floated away from its body, pressing the side of the jar, halting its spin in the fluid. It hung there, facing her.

Claire backed away.

Maybe the doll was designed to do that.

She moved. The baby pushed on the glass with one hand and turned to watch her. She moved again. The baby tracked her. They looked at each other for a long time. Claire told herself not to jump to conclusions. An hour later she jumped anyway.

It was alive.

She lifted the jar carefully. It was warm. Had it been when she unpacked it? She didn't think so. She carried it to the table, wrapping her hands around it, warming it further. Her breath misted the glass. "You want me to take you to my leader?" The baby blinked. "You're right, it's a dumb idea."

But evidence of the existence of extraterrestrial life was sitting on her table in a damned Mason jar. She should call *someone*. The cops, the FBI-NASA?

Claire blanked. If they didn't believe her—and *she* was having trouble grasping it—nothing would change. She'd still be sitting in the kitchen with an alien in her lap. But if they did—

She would no longer be among the missing.

The baby would be among the dissected.

This was Monday with a vengeance.

Claire rested her head on her arms and watched the baby bob. Maybe she'd read too many tabloid headlines, but suddenly it seemed dangerous to ask questions. No phone calls. She smiled tiredly. Not even to *Starway Collectibles*.

Now there was a thought. Her smile faded. Babies didn't grow in Mason jars. This one had to have been put there. Or maybe just fallen in: the jewel of all stupid accidents. Because it was a *baby*; its mother wasn't going to just *let* someone mail it.

And there was another thought. This was somebody's child and they were going to want it back. Claire remembered crying as the life-that-wasn't-quite fell out of her, and shivered.

She stroked her fingers down the jar. "Baby, if your mama handles loss the way I do, I'm in big trouble."

But she knew a way to guarantee her safety. Garbage pick-up was tomorrow, and newborns went missing every day. Plunk it in a can and run like hell. Let Mama find her then.

And let someone else find the baby and take a scalpel to it. Let the rats drag it home for brunch. Let Baby go screaming through a trash compactor.

Claire hoped Mama was a tolerant sort.

She fell asleep at the table, arms around the jar, and woke at dawn to find the baby's face near hers. It was watching her again. Its fluid had changed, become lighter, less dense. Maybe it was draining the nutrients out of it?

Claire thought that was a fine idea. She sat up and considered breakfast.

Baby tumbled as she rose, stopping her mid-motion. "What?" It stretched its arms over its head, then lowered them and rolled its eyes to meet hers. She whispered, "What?" It reached up again. Claire squinted into the jar.

Her breath froze. It was pushing at the lid.

Baby wanted out.

Well, yeah, bright girl, did you think it was going to stay in there forever?

The baby kicked weakly. Claire's hands fluttered helplessly for a moment, then grabbed the jar. Prenatal classes hadn't covered alien birth, but she knew the signs of distress. It needed out. Perhaps, like a human baby, it could only exist in the waters so long. She rummaged a jar opener from the knife drawer. On the second try it gripped and the lid came free.

Claire peered into the liquid. What if it couldn't eat what if it couldn't breathe oh God what if it drowned in the air—

A small hand splashed out of jar. Its long fingers wrapped around one of hers. The baby's head floated up out of the fluid. It looked up at her, and she couldn't help it—Claire smiled. Its eyes were midnight-blue, the color of her own.

Its skin took on a dull silver sheen as it emerged from the jar. Its mouth opened, and she waited for the usual indignant wail.

A sound like little bells came out.

The water was tepid now, with a faint smell of yeast. Claire dipped her fingers into the jar and very gently lifted him. He barely filled her cupped hands; he weighed almost nothing. Water dripped off him and puddled on the sideboard. She patted him dry with a fold of her housecoat, then eased him into the scoop neck of her nightgown.

Baby dropped his misshapen head in the hollow of her throat.

There was a flight of sweet notes as he yawned, exhaling vanilla breath. Claire brushed her chin across the top of his head.

"Be careful what you wish for," she said.

BECAUSE YOU MIGHT GET IT, SHE THOUGHT. SHE'D WANTED A BABY. SHE remembered a hectic day years earlier, when she'd wished for some time alone and been granted ten years.

All right, she hadn't actually been alone during her marriage, but she'd felt that way.

In the future, Claire thought, wishes would be more specific.

She made Baby's breakfast as she ate her own. "I'm working in the dark here," she explained around the toast. "I don't know if they have milk where you come from, but human babies like this stuff."

She stirred sugar into the warm milk, and washed the eyedropper. The baby gurgled most of it down. She waited to see if it came back up. When it didn't, she punched the dropper full again, then tipped the pan over her coffee cup.

Clink ka-ching. A sound like zills.

"No, you're too little for coffee."

Baby squinted in the crook of her arm. She grabbed a tissue to wipe his mouth, but only discordant chimes came out.

"Oh God oh God okay you're chiming so you can't be choking oh God

I've poisoned you—"

Human babies came with a built-in defense—whatever didn't agree with them, they disposed of. Who knew about this one? Claire drew breath and did the toughest thing possible: nothing. She couldn't call 911. Baby would have to shift for himself. She moved her fingers down his smooth body and encountered another question: how did Baby excrete?

She had an answer seconds later as she realized her hands were sticky and slick. Baby disposed of his waste through his skin.

Claire wrung out a facecloth at the sink. The faucet was still dripping as she landed on the floor. The baby jolted in her arms, chirping in protest.

"I'm sorry. My knees gave out." She reached up and groped the facecloth off the sideboard. Baby stuck a wet finger in his mouth. "Oh, you like that? Good—I'll get you a rubber duck."

She sniffed the facecloth: Baby didn't like the milk. She watched him suck his finger. Apparently he didn't mind the water.

Baby *clinked* again. Claire winced, but he seemed calm enough as he blinked up at her.

Ah. He'd just wasted his breakfast. He was still hungry.

Claire got on her feet with difficulty, and mixed a pan of sugar water. Baby drank and dozed off without incident. "Wise child," she thought. She was stiff from napping at the table.

Sunlight slanted through the blinds in her room, making bars on the bed. Claire slid under the covers and eased onto her side, curling around the baby. She wondered how long he would sleep. After coming to term in a Mason jar, could he sleep safely in a horizontal position?

Baby snuggled close, his hands against her cheek, and hummed contentedly. Claire relaxed. If it was good enough for him...

She woke in two hours and fed him again, then wrote a list as he slept. Leaving the house was out of the question. She couldn't take him with her, couldn't leave him alone, couldn't bring anyone in. She'd have the groceries delivered. Baby food might be okay if she thinned it.

No, wouldn't work. She'd ordered groceries before, but never baby food. All It would take was one stray comment—

She smiled down into those enormous blue eyes. "Hey, sweetheart, guess who's getting paranoid? I used to just worry someone would find *me* here." She scribbled a few more notes. "We'll try fresh fruit. I can purée that myself. Don't worry, we'll find something you like."

Don't worry. Claire snorted faintly. She was in way over her head. But she caught herself rocking him, swaying as she wrote, and let it go. He wasn't interrupting anything.

She retrieved him from the bedroom after the delivery boy left.

"These are green beans. What do you think?" Baby wrinkled his flat nose as she held them up. "I used to feel the same way. They're an acquired taste. What about this?" She sliced the apple and held it under his nose. He fluted a couple of notes and rubbed his mouth across it. "Oh, is that good?" She

crushed the slice into a thin sauce and fed it to him slowly.

That afternoon she learned he liked pear juice, barley water, and strawberry tea, which he sniffed happily when she drank it herself. He was indifferent to bananas, which she'd never liked.

She carried him to the window at sunset. "This is my favorite time of day. I love watching the stars. If you have to love something that doesn't love you back, the stars are it. Aren't they beautiful?"

She glanced down and caught him staring at white moths beating their wings on the screen.

"Yeah, Baby," she laughed, "those are pretty, too."

She wrapped him in her sweater and cradled him close. Sometimes the journey to the light was hard. It might be nice to have company for a while.

THE SHOWER GIFTS HAD NEVER BEEN RETURNED. THAT WOULD'VE BEEN her job, and before she felt up to it, Jason had packed them away. Even before moving day, when she'd found the box in the U-haul, she'd known dealing with the miscarriage would always be her job.

Claire dragged the rocker into the bedroom. She found the snuggli under a musical crib mobile and took both into the kitchen. Baby was in the laundry pile. Her pantyhose were on his head.

"Don't even think about robbing a bank—you're too short to see over the counter. That'd be a heck of a disguise, though."

She fastened the mobile to a chair back and wound the music box. He liked the lullaby, and bounced as the plastic stars spun. She cried softly as he warbled, a liquid sound she knew by now. He warbled when he heard her voice.

It was the sound he made when he recognized something.

Does this make sense to you? she wondered. *Do the stars really sing?*

She wore the snuggli in front so Baby rode with his head on her collarbones. He squinted down in the bag as she loaded the dryer, poking his head into her shirt.

"I've got news for you, kid—that's not where dinner comes from." She slid a hand down to move him, then realized he'd gone still against her breast.

He was listening to her heartbeat.

Oh God, letting him go would be hard. He was stronger now, a bit heavier, an inch taller. Rolling on the floor was an adventure. He pulled himself up against the furniture like any child. She loved the way he cooed in his sleep, like the song of small birds. His eyes were so blue she thought moons glowed in them, and knew he preferred shadows because sunshine bothered them.

But moonlight didn't. He trailed his long fingers through it like a sparrow soaking up heat, and her heart ached even as it rejoiced that her favorite time of day was also his.

She'd have a couple of blurred photos she'd taken in the garden, and when he was gone, she'd have his Mason jar. Not much. She still wondered

how he'd got in there. She'd wondered once if Mama might be dead, if she'd put Baby in the jar to hide him from danger. That notion had lasted until the six o'clock news. Claire sat Baby on her lap as she watched the update.

There were more reports of strange lights over Hastings, Kentucky. "Well, sweetheart, looks like Mama's hot on the trail."

THEIR FIRST TRIP TO THE GARDEN: FEAR. NO ONE COULD SEE OVER THE fence. There were no wandering cats to scratch him. But what if the soil was toxic to him, or the scent of the flowers poison? What if the insects found him tasty? She had no way of anticipating. Any bump could be a disaster.

In the end, he decided. She found him leaning on the door, trying to push it open, and thought of his exit from the Mason jar.

Baby wanted out.

She gathered him up and opened the door. He sang as they went out, a single note echoed by the wren on the roof. He looked up and seemed to smile. He always looked like that.

Claire knelt and lowered him toward the grass. He patted it curiously. No sign of pain, no blistering from a chlorophyll allergy. She plunked him on the green beside her and started to weed the daisies.

"Here, you want one?" He ran a tiny fingertip over the soft petals. "That one is I love you, and this is I love you not—it's okay, it's just a game—and this is I love you."

She pulled a blade of grass from his mouth, and he chimed as she tickled his chin with a buttercup. No yellow, no surprise. He tracked a blue jay as it sailed overhead, and Claire realized suddenly how frightening this could have been. Was the sky a strange color? Did he remember home?

Did he know this one was temporary?

Om. Claire knew that one: he wanted to be held. She obliged. He liked the tour of the garden. She'd cleared away the weeds and overgrowth, but hadn't planted much; the last tenants had left flowers of a dozen hues. She wondered what they'd felt, turning something they loved so much over to a stranger's care. She shivered in the June warmth and, without realizing she did so, Claire *omed*. Baby wrapped his arms around her neck.

HE DIDN'T FIT IN THE SNUGLI NOW. HE'D GRADUATED TO GRAPE JUICE. She'd caught him standing by himself, and grabbed him before he toppled.

She wanted to see his first steps.

He trilled in protest as she turned for the house, but the sun was hot and her skin itched. She jerked back as sparks jumped from the door handle.

It wouldn't be long. The air was heavy, as though a charge crackled through it. There were more frequent reports of the lights seen in Hastings. They were closer, moving in a rough line. The weather bureau couldn't explain them. The power companies claimed ignorance.

Claire waited till dark and went out on the step.

"Can you smell the rain coming? We can wait—I know how you like to

splash. I wish you could see a rainbow before you go.”

And new snow and a circus parade. It wasn't going to happen. Claire hiked the baby up to eye-level.

“You have to go soon. It's best for you.” Her voice broke. She tried again. “I can't take you anywhere else, and you can't stay with me forever. It's not as safe as it used to be.”

He looked up at her seriously. *Clink*.

“Because this morning the delivery boy asked if I had a home office. Someone's noticed I never go out, and it's not normal for people to stay home all the time. We were okay until the questions started.”

Claire smiled as Baby ran little fingers through her hair. “I don't want you to worry about me. I'll miss you, but I'll be okay.”

Baby trilled softly.

“All right, I'll be okay *eventually*. I never intended to stay here. I still have my real estate license. That's how I met Jason—I sold him his house. I can go back to the real world. It's an interesting place. Yes, almost as interesting as those.”

He was playing with her thumbs again. He didn't have any.

The clouds were blowing in fast. She looked down at the baby, squashed and bent at odd angles. She heard a crack of thunder and thought *There goes my heart*.

“Once,” she said, “in the middle of a fight, Jason asked me what I wanted. It was the only time he'd ever asked. I couldn't tell him I wanted someone to love and he wasn't it. I thought it would never happen. But we know better, don't we?”

He looked up and chimed briefly.

She said, “Will you try to remember me?”

Ching clink.

“I'll take that as a yes.”

They sat for a while. He would leave with the memory of birdsong. There wasn't a lot left to say. Finally she took him out to dance in the rain.

AND THEY WERE STILL DANCING. CLAIRE CIRCLED THE KITCHEN TO A country waltz on the radio. The rain stopped, and she considered the night sky in passing. Baby belonged in that icy Shambhala. She wondered which system was home.

He rubbed his head against her throat. It was a small movement, a sign of agitation. Claire's own skin felt tender, as though stroked with sandpaper. She could *feel* the people around them becoming edgy.

“Hang on, sweetheart—Mama's's coming.”

She wondered if she'd survive it. First contact with a Mason jar was one thing; Mama was likely to be another.

But first things first.

She trailed her fingers across his scalp. Her skin imprinted his warmth, his slight weight, his soft breath.

I will buy windchimes to echo your voice. I will hear the world differently. I will never again be too busy to look at the stars.

I'll remember you so clearly that a hundred years from now I'll still feel you in my arms.

Baby yawned an arpeggio. She waltzed him down the hall and settled in the rocker. Its motion lulled them to sleep.

THE LIGHT WOKE THEM.

A freshet of alto notes blew out of the brightness. Baby poked his head through the crook of her arm and warbled. Claire found her feet and brushed her mouth. over Baby's. She whispered, "Bye-bye," and wept as she held him out. Smooth arms brushed hers as they took him.

She forced a breath. She could be steady. She would be brave.

Her scream was horrible. Her grief was loud. But no—the scream wasn't hers: her throat would never make that sound without bursting. It was broken ice sliding off the roof.

It dawned on her. "Baby?

He wobbled out and grabbed her leg. Claire tugged him free and offered him to the light again. He shrieked and clamped his hand around her thumb.

"I'm sorry please oh God I'm sorry Baby she's your *mother*."

A pale hand extended from the brightness. It slipped over Baby's arm and closed around Claire's wrist. *Clink chime*. Not Baby.

Surprising herself, Claire smiled. She would continue to love the baby. If allowed the time, she'd ask how he'd got himself mailed. She'd planned to go back to the real world; she'd never said whose. Specifics were everything.

Be careful what you wish for.

Claire stepped into the light. ❁

About Our Authors

Clarion grad JOHN AEGARD ("Feng Burger") is probably living in Seattle right now. His work has previously appeared in *Pyramid* and *Northern Fusion*. His story "Guns of Joy" appeared in *On Spec* Summer 1999.

MARK ANTHONY BRENNAN ("Shelter From the Storm") says about himself: "I am currently living in Comox in a state of pre-apocalyptic bliss with my lovely wife Dora (my shelter from the storm). We have three children and one dog, but Dora figures that makes five kids she has to look after. You do the math. I have degrees in business administration and law, which of course provides an excellent background for writing speculative fiction. My work has appeared in *Challenging Destiny* and *Foxfire*, and also in such magazines as *Anotherrealm*, *Jackhammer*, *Millennium Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine* and *Steel Caves*. I can be contacted at: brennan@uniserve.com."

E. L. CHEN ("Two Certainties") is also an artist, which means she's pretty much screwed unless she marries rich. This is her second appearance in *On Spec*. Her first was "Winter and Construction" (Winter 2000). Look for "The Gates of Heavenly Peace" in our Summer 2001 World Beat theme issue.

CATHERINE MACLEOD ("Foster Child") lives in Nova Scotia, drinks too much coffee, and misses Frank Black. Recent appearances in *On Spec* (Fall 2000, Winter 2000) include a number of "postcards" from her collection of postcard fiction, "Alphabetia." Look for more postcards in upcoming issues.

L.E. MODESITT, JR. ("Precision Set") is better known as a fantasy author, especially of the "Recluce" books. His latest novel, a Spell song Cycle fantasy, *The Shadow Sorceress*, was published by Tor in June, 2001, and the next, an alternate world science fiction novel, *Ghost of the White Nights*, will be released this coming October. He has also just completed another volume of The Spell song Cycle of fantasy novels, for which he owes a great debt to his wife Carol Ann, who is indeed a beautiful soprano and the head of the opera program at Southern Utah University. Having survived eight children and previous spouses, they create and manage chaos in Cedar City, Utah.

STEVE MOHN ("Goodbye, Palindrome Bob" and "On Film & SF: Rosemary's Babies") has appeared previously in *the New York Review of Science Fiction* and *On Spec* ("Sonny Boy," Spring 2000). He lives in Montreal.

KATE RIEDEL ("Neighbors") was born and raised in Minnesota and is now a card-carrying Canadian living in Toronto. She has previously published in *Not One of Us*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *On Spec* ("Therapy," Summer 1994; "The Babysitter," Winter 1996; "Chad," Spring 1997; and "Whyte Laydie," Spring 1998). To complete the coincidental trilogy of stories featuring hordes of small animals making human beings very nervous, check out *Realms of Fantasy* June 1999 and the Turnstone press anthology *Divine Realms*, 1998.

HUGH A.D. SPENCER ("The Z-Burger Simulations") was born in Saskatoon and lives in Toronto. His recent writing credits include "Strategic Dog Patterning" in *Tesseract's*, radio adaptations of his stories "The Progressive Apparatus" and "Why I Hunt Flying Saucers" for American public radio and "Problem Project" planned for the second *North of Infinity* anthology. He is the current president of SF Canada. Hugh's experiences working at the A&W restaurant in Lethbridge, Alberta in 1978 was an important resource in developing "The Z-Burger Simulations." Previous *On Spec* stories include: "Why I Hunt

Flying Saucers," Winter 1991; "Icarus Down/Bear Rising," Spring 1992; "The Triage Conference," Summer 1993; "The Progressive Apparatus," Summer 1994; and "...And the Retrograde Mentor," Fall 1998.

CHRIS TURNER ("Eleanor Rigby Day") lives in Toronto. His fiction has appeared previously in *Quarry*, and his nonfiction appears regularly in *Shift* and a variety of other magazines. He recently won a National Magazine Award for feature writing.

One of the 1999 finalists for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, JAMES VAN PELT teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. His fiction has appeared in, among other places, *Analog*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Weird Tales*. Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling have twice included his stories in the honorable mention list of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Upcoming work is scheduled to appear in *Asimov's* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. When he's not teaching, writing or raising kids, he hunts for an agent to represent his first novel. His wife and three sons think he tells a pretty good bedtime story. His website is <http://www.sff.net/people/james.van.pelt>.

About Our Artists

JEAN-PIERRE NORMAND (Cover: "Discovery") Please see page 6.

JAMES BEVERIDGE (Frontispiece illustration for "The Saturn Ring Blues") resides in Edmonton, Alberta, and has been instigating aesthetic visual mayhem since childhood. He works with pencil, pen, brush, airbrush and his favorite, the pixel-pushing stylus. His last major project was doing backgrounds for cutscenes and package design for Prelusion (in Sweden) on the game *Gilbert Goodmate* (www.gilbertgoodmate.com). Still airbrushing as a general revenue maker, he is working on expanding his digital universe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The donors listed below have all given generously in the past year. We are grateful for their support.

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BEHIND THE SCENES SUPPORT:

The continued success of On Spec is possible only because of the generous donation of time and assistance from wonderful people such as:

*Jane Bisbee of Alberta Community Development and Alberta Foundation for the Arts,
Lori Shyba of the Alberta Magazine Publishers Association, Colin Bamsey and Tobey Morris of
Clear Lake Ltd., Merrill Distad and Randy Reichardt of the University of Alberta Library,
Marcel Gagné, Mici Gold, Donna McMahon, Robert Runté, Donna Weis, and Edward Willett.*

Financial support
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We acknowledge the financial support of the **Government of Canada**, through the **Publications Assistance Program (PAP)**, toward our mailing costs.

A4, colour, US\$7 or US\$36 for six issues
(or equivalent in Canadian dollars)
payable to TTA Press
5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK
www.tta-press.freewire.co.uk

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